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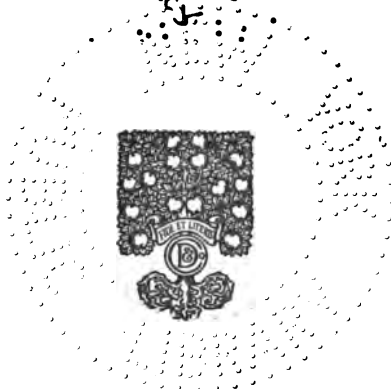
Sir George's Objection

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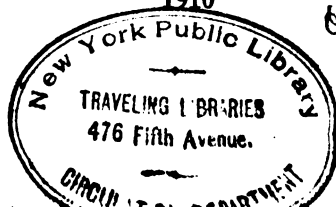
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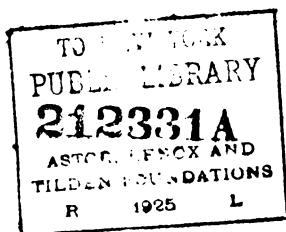


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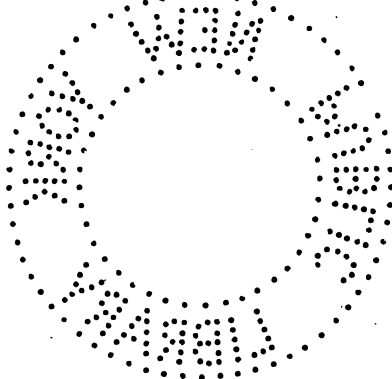
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**"I want . . . to accept the facts as they are,
however bitter or severe; to be a student and
a lover, but never a lawgiver."**

Sir George's Objection

CHAPTER I

ALL through the afternoon Mrs. Roberts and Kitty had sat in the loggia of the Villa Elena at Cannero—the loggia faced the end of Maggiore that reaches to Laveno and the Simplon. The distance was clear and the coast line to Oggebbio sharply defined, but there was an intermittent haze across the lake on the Luino side, as if the gods had lovingly dropped veils here and there over the beauty of the heights they loved best. On this side, behind Monte Carza on the right, the sun was setting. High up, far above the cherry orchards and the chestnut woods, they could see the little village of Oggiogno—the waiter at the Hôtel d'Italia called it “the other country”—it looked chilly and very still in the shade that had overtaken it. It was hard to believe that men and women lived out their lives up there—strange to remember the little Pension Belvedere where the peasants danced on fête days, the church where they prayed in life and by which they slept in death, the handful of houses, the narrow ways and twisted steps that led to them, the shrines—all that made up a tiny world apart from the great one in which people hurried and clamoured and fretted time away. There are many such villages on the sides of Maggiore, and each one seems to the traveller, as he looks up at it from the deck of the summer-time steamer, or the motor in which he tears along the white roads, spluttering dust on the glorious vegetation, to be a little contented

child of the world's—a waif, that has crept up there away from the noise and worry and all the tragedy that has been wrought in the name of civilisation.

Kitty knew every turn of the path to "the other country," and went along it in her thoughts; past the chalet, with the garden and the vineyard and the low moss-grown wall on which she had often leant to look downwards, past the signpost, where the road forked (pointing the track through chestnut woods to the cluster of houses called Casino), then up again till at the end of a long zigzag she came to a little chapel; and there, in the mental game she loved to play, she sat down to rest and to think vaguely that perhaps the little village high above the world in which most people lived, seeing far into the distances, had gathered a wisdom of its own and knew things that as yet were hidden in the future.

Presently she came back to reality. "Mother," she said, "the Signora Luchino is at the hotel. Do you think she will want the villa again?"

"She sometimes comes for a night, just for change of air."

Kitty waited a moment before she asked, "Are we always going to live here?"

"I don't know." A smile stole up from the grave mouth to the grey-blue eyes. "The best way is to take the hours as they come, and live in them. We love this place?"

"Oh, yes, we love it," Kitty answered with a long drawn sigh, as if she had more to say; but her mother had turned to her book again.

Cannero is on the lake, just opposite Luino. A handful of Italians have discovered it, and a few Eng-

lish folk in search of quiet arrive there—by chance, usually—and, having done so, go again and again. The town—for it calls itself one—consists of half a dozen narrow streets and scattered villas built on the lowest slope of Monte Carza, and ends in a road overhanging the lake. Here, facing a line of flowering trees and the clear water beyond, are a few more dwellings; the Villa Elena is among them and the Hôtel d'Italia. Above them all is the main road that stretches between the Swiss and Italian ends of the lake. Along it the motors, and such other traffic as there is, take their way, unheard and unnoticed for the most part by the happy folk below. There is no train, there are no amusements, no carriages to be had, nothing, in fact, that the usual pleasure-seeker desires; nothing but the infinite beauty with which Nature has endowed it, and the simplicity that is still its own. There is a factory at one end of the lower road, but so built that it is not disfiguring to the place—a flourishing affair, employing many of the poorer inhabitants, which accounts for the fact that there are no beggars nor hungry-looking folk, that disease and wretchedness seem to be unknown. At the other end of the road is the little landing-place at which the steamboats make up among them a dozen calls a day, bringing or taking away the letter-bags that are sometimes quite empty, but nevertheless go backwards and forwards. It is thus that the visitors find their one source of dissipation, for by the boats they can go to see fashion, as the modern tourist represents it, at Locarno or Pallanza; or to quieter places along the shores to discover other walks and mountain ways when those about Cannero are exhausted. And the ex-

peditions round Maggiore are endless, for it is a wonderful lake; without the sheer loveliness of Como and Lugano at their best, it has, when you come to know it, greater dignity and beauty than either, more secrets to tell those who can see and hear.

Mrs. Roberts had stopped at Cannero one day long ago in the steamer bound for Pallanza. The cherry orchards and the orange trees were a mass of bloom, the deep woods and the patches of colour on the mountain-side filled her with longings. Kitty was a little girl; she took her hand, went over the gangway and along the road to the Albergo—she had seen it from the boat—a simple almost rough shelter. They lunched, wandered and dreamt a few hours away, and went on by the afternoon train to their destination. But she made up her mind that some day they would return. They did, when Kitty was fifteen. The primitive Albergo had become the Hôtel d'Italia, with sun-blinds stretching over its balconies, and little brown lizards darting and racing in the sunshine up and down its white walls. To her surprise the picturesque old landlord remembered her, probably because she was striking to look at, with deep lines on her face, though it was a young face still, and a shyness in her manner that, passing for haughtiness, was impressive. He took her to be an English aristocrat and probably rich, though she was neither the one nor the other. She stayed at the Hotel for three long good months, happier than she had been for years, then rented the Villa Elena of the Signora Luchino, who had taken up her residence in Milan.

There—in the villa—Kitty had grown almost to womanhood. Her mother looked at her wonderingly,

hardly believing it. Could it be true that Kitty was the baby she had held in her arms when she sat, stark and dazed, staring out of window in the bare top room at Lewes—that she was the little girl, almost a baby still, who had walked up and down, holding her hand, by the Austrian lake, or the schoolgirl going to classes at Freiburg, and loving to linger on her way back in the porch of St. Nicholas? She had grown up—grown up—and was sitting there, tall and slight, and wide-eyed, looking up at Oggiogno, waiting for a share of life. What would come to her better than the beauty and peace of this place, in which all care, and even regret gave way to the mists of the mornings, the scented shadows of the nights, the breathless wonder of the days? But Kitty was lonely and eager. None of the usual amusements of girlhood had fallen to her share. She had lived entirely with her mother, going to classes when they were in places that made it possible—generally small places—seeing pictures, reading Italian poetry, drinking in beauty, the beauty of the natural world; but all the time she was waiting for human experience. Her mother knew it—she saw the questioning look in her eyes, she heard the note that sometimes came to her voice—the swallow has it in early summer, suppressed yet eager—the suggestion of seeking, of unconscious knowledge that the best of life, the kernel of it, has yet to come.

There had been one possibility, one incident on her calm horizon—a year ago now; perhaps it was on the outcome of it even yet that the curtain would ring up.

Presently she spoke again. "Mother, I have been thinking lately that I know so little about anything—I mean about our family."

"What do you want to know?" The voice was cold, almost reluctant.

"When I try to look back, to imagine you, dearest, and my father—what your lives were together, and what our family history has been, I always feel as if a gate is shut."

"We never had many relations," Mrs. Roberts forced herself to answer. "Your grandfather and I lived alone at Santa Maria."

"I know that——"

"Some day I'll take you there and to Sestri Levante. We'll go and see Mr. Godstone."

"Yes, but I wish I knew about things," came the half-entreating answer. "It's so strange that I know nothing except that you did live there with grandfather—that you married father, and he died. I've never seen any relations except Aunt Robin and Uncle James. Last year at Andermatt I tried to make her talk about my father—you don't know how much I think of him and love him. I wanted to know what he was like. I was always afraid to ask you about him."

"What did she say?"

"She said he was the most charming creature in the world; and then the gate, thereto, seemed to shut—I could almost hear it click. I wish I knew everything right from the beginning, as if it were in a book. Could you bear to tell me, mother?"

"Your grandfather went abroad—to Italy after my mother died, when I was a child. He was a student, and loved quiet—and the Mediterranean; that was why he made for the little places on the coast beyond Genoa." Mrs. Roberts spoke in a low, monotonous

voice. "He began to write a book on the Italian flora, but he never finished it—for he was a dreamer who planned his work and thought about it and gathered material, but never used it."

"Yes," said the girl, her chin resting on her hands.

"We went to Levanto first, and lived at the Hôtel Nazionale, kept by an old Italian. It had been the palace of some ruined nobleman, and there was a salon with frescoes on the walls. I had no playfellows, and when I was a little girl I used to walk round and look at the people in the frescoes and pretend they were alive. We were there for a long time."

"You had no friends—I mean no English friends?"

"Yes; there was Mr. Godstone at Sestri Levante, a few miles off. He was a dreamer too, just as your grandfather was, an old man—or he seemed old to me. He had collected a curious library, that your grandfather was glad to use. We used to go over every week from Levanto to see him. Then we went to live at Santa Maria, which was another little place quite near; your grandfather was the English chaplain there."

"And then?"

"We moved up to a mountain place in the summer-time when we wanted to be cool."

"But how did you learn things, mother?"

"From your grandfather and Mr. Godstone. An Italian woman, called Riva, belonging to the hotel where the frescoes were, taught me to sew."

"You must have been so lonely?"

"No, but I never knew any one well, who was young—till your father came."

"Yes?" Kitty said breathlessly.

"Mr. Godstone or your grandfather took me sometimes to look for specimens. We read books together, and went expeditions to romantic places—they both loved the beauty of the world very much."

"And you do too, mother dear."

"Yes, I do. Apart from you it is everything to me."

"And my father?" Kitty asked gently. "Can you tell me about him, or would you rather not?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Only"—she was almost afraid, for her mother's voice had changed—"only anything I may. How you knew him, and what he was like."

"He was so like you," Mrs. Roberts answered, looking up. "Sometimes when I see you a little way off in the twilight I think he is coming back—through the shadows. He was tall, and had a merry laugh. He was gayer than you are, but you are like him."

"Are you glad?"

"Yes." But she shuddered, and Kitty wondered what her mother was seeing in her thoughts.

There was a pause before she went on. "He came to Sestri Levante to see Mr. Godstone, who had known his father years ago. Mr. Godstone brought him over to Levanto, and we all went more expeditions—people always go expeditions abroad. Mr. Godstone was writing a book too—about Sinibaldo de' Fieschi, who became a Pope. We went over to see his birthplace and to Chiavari, where there is a cathedral. When we knew your father better he and I went long walks alone, just as you and Mr. Saxton have——"

"Only he was different," Kitty put in hurriedly.

"Yes—very different. There are wonderful walks about Levanto, and an old castle to climb to. We

wandered about, while the two old men talked." She stopped as if the history had come to an end.

"But when you were married, mother?"

"We went to Wales, to a cottage that belonged to your grandfather. He came back with us for his health was breaking; and he had lost money and worried about it. We were in Wales a long time—at least I was. Your father had to go to London. He was a barrister, but had other work as well. And you were born, and your grandfather died." She stopped again.

"And then?" Kitty said very softly.

Mrs. Roberts's tone became distant, her manner even awkward. "Later—after a time—your father died. Aunt Robin wasn't married then. She was very good to us, but I only saw her two or three times—I didn't want to see any one. It was better to come abroad. England was chilly and miserable. We went to Austria—you and I alone—to the lakes till the cold came, then, after a long time, back to Italy. I have never been to England again." There was another pause before she added, "There is nothing else to tell you."

"Had my father no relations?"

"Only a brother—he is in Australia—and Aunt Robin; his mother died a little while before he did. I only saw her once; she was very kind to us."

Kitty bent forward and kissed the hand that was resting on the balustrade. "Thank you, darling," she said gently. "I longed to know about him. I think of him very often—much more now that I am older."

Mrs. Roberts looked up at her gratefully, and then it seemed as if she had entered a dream, or as if the shut gate had opened and she looked down the way it disclosed—a way that was hidden from Kitty.

CHAPTER II

BUT the next day Kitty went back to the previous question; for in spite of what Mrs. Roberts had said about her love for Cannero, they both knew in their hearts that it was only a stopping-place a waiting time.

"Have we any plans?" she asked. "I often wonder how it will be."

"Plans—how what will be?"

"I mean, shall we ever live in England?"

"Why should we live there? You have been abroad nearly all your life. You would be a stranger."

"I know." She leant forward and her mother, seeing the look on her face, quailed a little inwardly. "But we can't stay here always. It's lovely I know, but it's not living enough—not enough," she repeated.

"What do you want to do? What more do you want?"

"I don't know."

"Have you been talking to Miss Bateson?" Mrs. Roberts smiled when she spoke of her. Miss Bateson was an American who had come a second time to Cannero and was at the hotel now; she insisted on being friendly after a fashion, walking easily in and out of the villa though she was seldom invited there. "She told me the other day that we ought to go to London, but you wouldn't like it; the climate is horrid, the streets are grimy, the food is uneatable, and there is so much—wickedness." She hesitated over the last

word. "Somehow it communicates itself till a sense of it becomes a part of you."

"But you've been so long away from it, mother dear. Perhaps it's better, or you don't remember; besides one needn't live in London. Mr. Saxton says there is nothing so beautiful as English country, even in Italy." She looked round, as if to grasp how wonderful anything more beautiful must be.

"People never seem to be very happy there."

"Aunt Robin and Uncle James are happy; and they live in London."

Aunt Robin was Kitty's great-aunt, wife of Sir James Burfield, a fairly well-known physician.

"They are older—much older than we are at any rate." Mrs. Roberts corrected herself, for she remembered that Lady Burfield was very active indeed for her fifty-four years. Uncle James, of course, was over sixty, and a little pompous, but perhaps that was natural to his profession.

"They've been young."

"Yes, they've been young."

"Mr. Saxton declares that England is the most splendid country in the world, and London is the centre of it. He has a little place somewhere in the West of England, near Dunster in—in Somersetshire." Kitty was not strong in English geography. "He says it is lovely, but he doesn't go to it often, because he is dull all alone. His mother lives nearer London. She—she wants him to marry."

Mrs. Roberts looked up; she was beginning to get a clue to the conversation. "Does he want to marry you?" the words came from her abruptly, almost before she knew it.

A flush dyed Kitty's face, she moved her hands nervously. In spite of all the years spent together, they had never been very intimate; there was an aloofness in Mrs. Roberts's manner even to her own child.

"Yes, mother."

"When did he ask you?"

"Yesterday. I met him at the post-office and we walked on, by the vineyard path, to the upper road. I didn't dream he was thinking of that, or I shouldn't have gone—I didn't know he even thought me grown up."

"I was married at your age—what did you say?"

"I said I couldn't, of course. It would be too absurd—he is thirty-six and I am only eighteen."

"He looks young; thirty-six is such a good age in a man's life—you might do worse than marry Mr. Saxton."

"I simply couldn't." Kitty stood up and put her back against the wall of the house. "I don't love him, not a bit; he's very kind, but I couldn't—you don't understand," the expression in her eyes said more than her words.

"Yes—I understand—but I'm sorry for him." Mrs. Roberts felt that Mr. Saxton was bound to suffer the pangs of unrequited love if he set his heart on marrying anything but a sensible woman of over eight-and-twenty. "Did he seem much disappointed?"

"No. He looked very grave for a minute, and then he said we must go on being friends—that he should like us to stay with him in England; his mother was going to spend the winter at his house near Dunster—he always goes there in the autumn. He told me about

the red deer and the Castle—it must be lovely. I should so like to see it.”

“I daresay he would be very kind—and it would be peaceful.”

“Peaceful? Oh, mother, one wants more than that. It is such a strange way of looking at it—I couldn’t—couldn’t. I don’t think he minded,” she added regretfully, for a girl likes her first offer to be a serious thing. “It isn’t as if he could care frightfully for any one. I don’t think he will ever do that—but it will make no difference.”

“What do you know about being cared for ‘frightfully’?”

“Mother dear, every one knows. There are things we seem to be waiting for—they are in the world—whether we get them or not.”

“What things?” Mrs. Roberts asked, though she felt it to be almost a sacrilege, this peering into her child’s heart.

“I can’t tell you.” Kitty knelt by her side and her voice was low and almost frightened as she went on. “I know; but they haven’t put themselves into words yet—besides, I always feel dreadfully shy with you, darling, though I love you so.”

Mrs. Roberts looked at her, then out towards the lake. If Kitty could only know the shyness that she sometimes felt—the distance that seemed to stretch between them—and yet she loved her better than anything in the living world. If for a moment she had seemed to urge a dull marriage with Mr. Saxton it was not that she had wished it; it was only dread of disaster that prompted her to hold a momentary brief for

what seemed like a haven of safety. "I know—words are difficult sometimes—to me too," she said after a moment's silence. "Perhaps it's as well—but don't be afraid of me, it would be cruel. Mr. Saxton does not look like a hero; I can see that." She stopped, as she had a way of doing, to contemplate in her thoughts the person of whom she was speaking or the thing she was considering.

Mr. Saxton was fairly tall, he had a pale face to which the colour came easily, honest eyes, and scanty fair hair. He was not a man to appeal to a girl, but he looked good, his voice was kind, and he was curiously placid. Mrs. Roberts thought he might be a solution of the future. She had worried a good deal lately about a possible one, there had been moments even of panic in her heart. Mr. Saxton would not be difficult to—to say things to, nor easily turned aside from a woman he loved. Life with him would not be exciting, but there would be no shocks, no tragedy; there would be comfort, even luxury, for he was well-off and of some importance in his county. A clever gossiping woman who lived within hail of him in England had been at the hotel three years ago when he first stayed at it; she had said that he was the kindest man in the world and devoted to his mother. After that they had come to know him. When Sir James and Lady Burfield arrived on a fortnight's visit, excursions were made in which Mr. Saxton joined, though he was never enthusiastic and had little to say: "one of those worthy men," some one had remarked, "whose lives are centred in the small country place in which they live and think the rest of the world an unnecessary annexe."

"He is young to assume that already, but probably

his father was a dull country dog before him," Sir James had answered.

In the expedition up the lovely Cannobio valley and to other places round the lake, quite simply but as a matter of course the dull man was always at Kitty's side. She was fifteen then, with the flush of early girlhood on her face, the light of it in her eyes; her dark hair hung in a pigtail down her back, and her heart was full of laughter and happiness. She thought him a fogey, a kind fogey, rather like a school-master; though he was only thirty-three then, a staid thirty-three, with a slight hint of baldness, and a well-measured voice in which he talked chiefly of botanical matters with geological variations.

Altogether he was looked upon as a highly respectable hotel acquaintance, but no one expected to see anything more of him when he had politely and without much cordiality gone off to do some mild climbing in the Swiss Alps. A year later he turned up at the hotel again and left a card at Mrs. Roberts's villa. She looked at it bewildered; she had hardly seen one since the days when occasionally polite English visitors called at Santa Maria. No one ever left cards on anybody in Cannero.

After that unexpected courtesy, it seemed only natural to invite Mr. Saxton to tea. He had come promptly. A trifle more massive but perhaps rather less silent than usual, he made a good impression and a few not at all improving remarks so that Kitty felt less afraid of him than she had done before. He had been in London the preceding winter; there had been a season of opera and a couple of interesting plays, and he had something—not much—to say concerning

them. To Kitty, who had been nowhere save to a few picture galleries and picturesque places, mostly in Italy and Switzerland, it gave a hint of mysteries and enchantments that were far away. Gradually there stole into her heart an impatience of the quiet routine of her life, but she was hardly aware of it and never put it into words; for she and her mother seldom spoke of the things they dreamt over, or worried outwardly at restrictions.

She had altered a good deal since Mr. Saxton had seen her. It took him by surprise; his eyes lighted up and the colour came faintly to his face when she smiled at seeing him—but there were no other signs. Even these Mrs. Roberts did not notice, nor the reluctance with which he vanished at the end of a fortnight.

In the summer that followed there was an incident, the episode in Kitty's life that had altered the whole of it. The Burfields spent their holiday in Switzerland. Sir James said he wanted the air of the Swiss Alps and a language he could cope with, by which he meant French and not Italian. He compromised with his wife by inviting her relations to stay a fortnight with them at Andermatt. Mrs. Roberts determined to let Kitty go alone; she thought it would be a little excitement and adventuring for her, seeing how completely together their life had been. It was an excitement for the lonely mother too, when she took her girl across to Luino and put her into the train for Göschenen, where she was duly met and driven to her destination.

There was a reading party at Andermatt. In it Sir James discovered Harry Kerriston, only son of Sir George Kerriston, an old patient. "A very good-looking boy of two-and-twenty," Aunt Robin wrote, at

the end of the fortnight which lengthened into three weeks. "He has been with us all this week, and it is quite evident that he and Kitty have taken to each other. Your uncle likes him, and let them ride over the pass together yesterday. The other day we all went up the Oberalp, where there is a little lake. They looked so happy together I couldn't help building castles, and thinking that it would be the best thing that could happen. His father, who is very well off, gave us a silver inkstand when we were married; he had just come from India, I remember, and dined with us one night. The boy is at Magdalen still, going into politics later—his father expects him to be Prime Minister, no doubt. I can't tell you what a comfort it would be to me to know that we had helped to shape the dear child's life in a right direction. She is very young, of course; so is he—but youthful romance has more sweetness in it than any other."

Mrs. Roberts had ridden up, in the dawn, on a mule to Trarago, a village considerably higher than Oggigno, where there is one of the many small isolated hotels that are to be found in the district—cool and still and often wrapped in the clouds—meaning to stay there during Kitty's absence. She was sitting on the bench outside the white green-shuttered house when the letter arrived; she read it with dismay—a dismay that never occurred to her for a moment when, many months later, she heard that Mr. Saxton had succumbed to Kitty's charms. That, she knew, might be possible; but something told her this was not—she was afraid even to think of it. She hurried down to Cannero again and telegraphed for Kitty, but the answer came

that Lady Burfield had hurt her foot and begged that her niece might stay longer to go excursions with Sir James—there was no invitation extended to Mrs. Roberts this time, and no refusing the request. The summer heat at the foot of Monte Carza was terrible; she went up to Trarego again, and spent the long days and longer nights thinking—thinking—then wrote to Mr. Godstone. He was still living, just as he had been ever since she could remember, at Sestri Levante. When the answer came, there was a passage in it over which she brooded and found comfort:—"I myself have always believed in remembering only what is good and beautiful for everyday human purposes—for purposes of history it is and must be different. No matter how pleasant a buffer the present forms, sorrow and pain lie in wait for us all—there is no need to brew more, unless necessity forces us. I cannot see why that fetich, confession (for a fetich it often becomes) should bring unhappiness to this poor child. What good would it do—what purpose would it serve? You gave your promise—keep it in the spirit and the letter; wrench your thoughts away from all the memories that afflict you, and let them dwell on all that was best in him. To my mind this is what we should do to every one and to the world itself."

Three weeks later Kitty, put into the train again at Göschenen, arrived at Luino on her way home. There was an expression on her face that had never been there before, but something sealed her mother's lips; she couldn't ask questions. Kitty waited for them in vain. "It had been such a happy time—if you'd been there, darling, it would have been perfect," she said. "Aunt Robin's foot was not much hurt; I think she was bored

with excursions and glad to stay behind, while Uncle James and—Mr. Kerriston and I went about.”

“What was Mr. Kerriston like?” Mrs. Roberts asked at last; they were crossing the lake to Cannero.

“He is tall—and he’s rather dark——”

“Where is he now?”

“He has gone on with the reading party to do some climbing. He is going back to Oxford in October and——” There had been reluctance in Mrs. Roberts’s voice, the lines on her face had deepened, a hard look, born of an inward struggle to keep back the thoughts that tried to force themselves upon her, came to her eyes. Kitty stopped and the sense of distance came between them again. They walked along the lower road almost in silence, the one thinking “It shall be as she feels it must. Nothing shall be forced; if she wants to speak, if she can, she will, and if not—she has a right to silence”; and the other, “Dear mother, if she only knew, if she could only guess, or if I could make myself tell her.”

Then life together began anew. Inwardly it was different with them both, outwardly it was the same. But the weeks and months went by; there was no sign of any development, only an unspoken knowledge that caused one of them to live dreaming and waiting, and the other to wait too, but half dreading.

Gradually, as the winter went by, an anxious expression came to Kitty’s face; her mother saw it, but still she was silent: Kitty was so young, and first romances had a knack of wearing themselves away if they were not nourished on words and sympathy. Early in the year, Mr. Saxton appeared again, saying that he wanted to see if the spring flowers were anything like

those in Somersetshire. By this time he was regarded as an old friend who had known Kitty when she was a little girl, and she was allowed to go occasional walks with him alone.

The roadsides, sloping steeply to the mountains, were yellow with primroses, the air was faint with the breath of violets, there were patches on the mountain paths covered thickly with crocuses, green pockets full of snowdrops and all the tender flowers that love the first months of the year; the mountain shrines were garlanded by the peasants as they took themselves up pleasuring on fête days, or as they carried wine and provisions to the high châlets and hotels: a sense of awakening was everywhere. Then a mist gathered, hardly definable at first, but it grew deeper and deeper, swathing the orchards with gossamer, stretching from tree to tree, from slope to slope, a bridal veil of blossom for the earth, when she gave herself again to the sun she loved.

"Oh, it can't be as lovely as this in England," Kitty said, as she stood with Mr. Saxton by the sign-post pointing to Casino, looking down at the joyous lake stretching its length in the distance, and up at the mountain ranges opposite ending in the clouds.

"It is," he said staunchly. She hardly heard him, her heart was filled with belief that seemed like knowledge of wonderful years to come, years that the beautiful world had to give. She forgot the grave gentleman watching her, half awkwardly, half questioningly, and thought of a summer ago and a little round lake on the Oberalp just below the snow line above Andermatt.

CHAPTER III

Mrs. ROBERTS stood on the balcony; it was at right angles to the loggia, and faced the lake; a sun-blind softened the glare of the afternoon. The faint swishing sound of the water when a rowing-boat passed, of the ripples that broke on the pebbly beach, came up to her, with the scent of the orange trees beside the road, of the acacias and rose trees in the garden fronting the house. She realised it all with a sense of being pleasantly hypnotised, and watched the changing sparks of gold on the lake, the brown-pointed sails of a cargo boat, the long, noiseless passage of a timber raft, a little white motor-launch that hurried on as if ashamed but happy—one after the other, at intervals sufficiently far apart to preserve the effect of silence that was over everything, yet sleepily near enough to prove that the world had still its doings to continue, even in the most languorous hours of the day. Mr. Saxton's proposal had been constantly in her mind since yesterday; it foreboded so much, not for him, but for Kitty apart from him. A sense of the inevitability of change in all relationships and the uselessness of resistance forced itself upon her. The tide of life was turning. There are times when it seems to drift away from us; when people and events alike seem to forget us; when nothing happens and we go on, mildly content, vaguely or impatiently waiting, not caring or not daring to speculate on what is to come. It had been so with her till lately; the years had been one so like the other that but for an occasional change of residence, the

growing taller of Kitty, and the far apart meetings with Lady Burfield, she would hardly have been able to disentangle them in her memory. Now it seemed as if, unknown to her, indefinite currents had started on their way that would alter the course of their lives; some vital force seemed to be realising the dwellers in the quiet home at Cannero, the most simple incidents to be developing in unexpected directions. It was strange that the coming and going of Mr. Saxton, which she had taken with little concern, should have been among them, and the visit to Andermatt last year, which she had thought would be merely a break in the monotony of Kitty's life, had already made a mark there was no obliterating.

She roused herself and looked across at Luino. A steamer was nearing the landing-stage; it looked like a dream thing in the distance. Her eyes were strong and followed it; she could make out a white spot on the shore, and knew that it was the statue of Garibaldi that stands for ever watching the route of his march. Farther to the right, well back from the water's edge, was a little station from which the toy-like train started every morning for Varese—along the mountain ledges cut for it, across the valleys on wonderful viaducts, and through the villages. There was a factory halfway; the girls who worked in it put their heads out of windows to see the passengers as they passed—a laughing group generally stood on the steps. It was odd that a factory should be there, in so romantic a setting; but it only suggested, as did the one at Cannero, a working place; it was like a hive set in a garden, the workers going in and out were like summer bees. Last week she and Kitty had gone to Varese, glad, though they

said no word of it to each other, to have started unseen by Mr. Saxton; he would have asked leave to go perhaps, and been in the way. The weather had been glorious. If Kitty had been gayer the day would have been perfect; but there had been a questioning, absent look in her eyes, it had often come to them lately, as if she were asking some time and space to give—to hasten.

She turned her eyes from the mountain range that hid Varese to the one on the left. Monte Generoso, rising behind Luino, looked like a giant; the dim, dark patch on the sky line was the hotel at Bella Vista. How well she knew the view from it! Long before she had ever imagined that she would live beside it she had looked across to the blue lake before her now, and thought what a wonderful world it was and how she loved it: she was thinking it still, and that she couldn't have lived but for its beauty. Even in the year when the curtain had fallen, and she was left shivering and alone, she had felt that if she was to go on, to live for Kitty, who was a baby, it must be away from the disfigurements that men had put up, away from crowds and noises; above all, away from churches that had no whisperings of bygone centuries—the centuries that were nearer to infinite wisdom than any that came after—with which to soothe and comfort her. Her only chance seemed to be where Nature held a long, high noon of beauty. She felt as if Nature had recognised her as one of her children, and had gradually given her back peace and happiness. Yes, happiness; not soon, but slowly, and at last. There had been days when she hated herself for it, when she remembered the tragedy of years ago. But it was her religion, she told her-

self, this love of earth, this feeling that it understood and helped her, as a nun feels that Christ helps when some crisis in her life has driven her to the cloister: her convent was among the mountains, beneath great trees, by the side of lakes, with the gifts of Heaven in sight. Thirty years ago, when she was a little girl of eight, Mr. Godstone's old servant at Sestri Levante had told her that the flowers and scented trees were Heaven's birthday gifts to the world, and every day was a birthday.

At Cannero in some sort of fashion she had stolen out of her convent; the people who came to the hotel were full of simple human kindness. In the months before she took the villa it was impossible to avoid knowing some of them; dear people, who cared nothing for amusements and the usual follies, students or invalids mostly in search of quiet—there had been few even of these. Sometimes half shyly she joined them for the after-dinner coffee at the picturesque café down the road where—it was a habit at Cannero then—they sat outside and watched for the last boat coming through the gathering darkness with the last message for the night from the outside world. But as a rule that was the extent of the intimacy.

When the Burfields arrived things became easier, more intimate; but that group went, others took its place and went too. A few people came a second, even a third time, not only because the place was lovely, but, unconsciously, because they remembered a tall, graceful woman, slow of movement, and young still, who seemed to dominate it—a pale woman with blue eyes and burnished hair, and a flickering smile that haunted them.

A happy little spinster who sat on a camp-stool and made harmless pictures in water-colour once said, as she saw her coming towards her under the orange trees: "She looks like a Rossetti or a Burne-Jones; if I could only paint her in that grey dress and shady hat—why, I should do something." But she never dared attempt it. There was an air about Mrs. Roberts—the landlord had mistaken it for haughtiness—that made it impossible to ask favours. In a sense she was an enigma to the people who watched her; but they were content to wait patiently for the answer, if there was ever to be one.

Kitty went up to her mother on the balcony. "Mr. Saxton met me in the garden," she said; "he is coming in almost directly to say good-bye."

"It will be awkward for him."

"Oh, he doesn't mind a bit; he's like a large, sleepy dog that wags its tail slowly and very seldom barks." She looked across the lake. The boat had left Luino; in a few minutes it would bring the afternoon mail-bags to Cannero. "There may be something for us," she said. "Shall I go and see?" The letters had to be fetched from the post-office after the morning.

"I don't think I want to be left alone with Mr. Saxton."

"You needn't be afraid, dearest; he isn't very unhappy. I will come back directly they have sorted the letters." She was always anxious about them; her mother had noticed it, but she was a wise woman, and never worried even her own child with questions.

The Italian servant, Luigi, announced "Signor Saxton." He stood just inside the room looking sheepish and apologetic. "I'm going to-morrow morning; I

thought I would come and say good-bye," he explained.

"I am sorry." The voice and the outstretched hand seemed to reassure him. "It has not been a very long visit this time. Oh, do sit down; we'll have some tea."

He hesitated a moment, moved a chair towards her, and said "Thank you."

"Kitty has gone to the post-office; the boat is just in." It seemed natural to mention her.

"I wonder I didn't meet her; I looked for her. She always flits along about this time. I suppose she expects something?" He had noticed it too, Mrs. Roberts thought. A moment slipped by in rather awkward silence, then he asked slowly, "Did she tell you—about yesterday?"

"Yes." She looked up at him with a grave, kindly smile; he felt that she was not as cold as he had taken her to be.

"I didn't suppose it would be any good, but I thought I would ask her." He seemed almost amused at the recollection.

"She's too young."

"I would wait."

She shook her head. "No; don't wait."

"I'm not in a hurry."

"She's so very young; she knows nothing of the world."

"She'll grow older."

"Oh, yes, but——" she stopped and looked at him. What could she say? He was not ugly, but he had no charm; and the lack of expression on his face and the heaviness of his gait made him dull—just a solid Englishman inclined to grow portly.

"You think it wouldn't be any good--I mean even by-and-by?"

"I'm afraid not."

Luigi came in with a little table and cups. Mr. Saxton watched her make the tea and struggle with the flame under the kettle. For a minute it seemed as if they had dropped the subject, but he went back to it.

"Anyhow," he said, "it needn't make any difference."

Mrs. Roberts was almost startled. "Difference? I don't understand."

"We can go on being friends, I mean. She said we could. I shouldn't like to lose sight of her. I have known her a long time now——" the colour came to his face for a moment while he hesitated, "and—I'm very fond of her."

She looked at him again and liked him. "I believe you would be very good to her."

"I'd try. I'd do anything I could to make her happy."

"I know it—I can feel it," Mrs. Roberts answered, her reserve broken down by his manner, "but she's too young for you, she's hardly a woman yet; she's only eighteen."

He hesitated a moment. "Some girls have been younger——" he said tentatively. "Women ought to marry early; they always did till the new ideas came along."

"It's no good—it isn't, indeed."

"Well—you know, I suppose." Then, as if he were determined to make the best of things, he added with more animation, "At any rate you'll come and see

us, won't you—I mean if you come to England? I told her about Dunster. She wants to come. My mother will be there next winter; she would like her so much."

Mrs. Roberts felt that this was hardly necessary under the circumstances. "It's very kind of you. I fear we are not likely to be in England, though sometimes I think I should like to go." The words startled her; they were said almost without her knowledge; they seemed to be the expression of a desire that was coming but had not yet made itself felt.

"I wish you would. She doesn't know it at all—it doesn't seem very patriotic," he added with a little laugh, as if he had forgotten the old subject in the new one he had started. "Miss Bateson wants to persuade you to come to London on a visit to her."

"Miss Bateson?" She was quite surprised. "She hasn't said anything to me about it."

He fished out one of the two lumps of sugar he had inadvertently put in his tea before he answered. "She will be there soon, and seemed to think it a good idea."

"She's a nice woman," Mrs. Roberts said, thinking how much wiser it would have been if he had set his affections on Miss Bateson rather than on a girl of eighteen.

"She's not a bad sort," he agreed slowly; "but she's rapid—too rapid. At the pace she goes she will get through the world twice over before she has done with life."

"I daresay; but she gets a good deal out of it."

"She hasn't time—she hurries on and leaves the best things behind."

Then Kitty entered, she had a letter in her hand which she gave to her mother. She seemed to have forgotten yesterday. "Tea, and Mr. Saxton," she said gaily, "how nice; do sit down—and have some cake." She handed him the plate, and he smiled with pleasure at her little imperious air.

"I said I would come and say good-bye," he explained for the second time.

"Yes, I know," she answered, obviously thinking of something that pleased her. "I wonder if you'll come to Cannero again next year, and where we shall be."

Her mother looked up. "We shall be here, of course."

"Perhaps not. The Signora Luchino wants the villa back again. The postmaster told me."

"You'll have to go to England," Mr. Saxton said.

"It would be lovely," came from Kitty.

"Then you must come and see us in Somersetshire."

"We'll do everything," she said joyfully.

He looked at her with lazy surprise. "You seem very happy to-day."

"I am," she answered, and looked towards the window. Under the sun-blind she could see a strip of the opposite shore and the line of blue water against it. A faint whiff of orange-blossom from the trees by the roadside beneath, and the sweet and slightly cracked sound of bells from the old church ten minutes off, seemed to reach the room together. "Who wouldn't be happy," she turned a radiant face towards him, "when the world is so heavenly? I can hardly bear it." Suddenly she put out her hands, and drew them back quickly, as if she feared he thought her heartless. "You mustn't misunderstand," she said; "human be-

ings, our little affairs, ourselves seem of so little account on a day like this and in a place like this."

He stared at her again. "I daresay," he answered; "but the human things—our little affairs, as you call them—have a great deal to say to our enjoyment of any amount of good weather and fine scenery."

"Yes, yes, you're quite right, only—only—oh, I don't know——" She turned away with a happy sigh.

Mrs. Roberts had taken up her letter and examined the postmark. "It is from Mr. Wendover," she said to Kitty. "He must be coming back—it's posted in Lisbon."

"Wendover the traveller?" Mr. Saxton asked.

"Yes; he is an old friend of ours."

"It must be four years since he went away."

"Nearly."

"He has done a great deal. The Geographical will make much of him." He turned to Kitty, with a clumsy laugh—he wanted to show her that he was lively. "You'll have to come and hear him; afterwards you will be glad to get into the country."

"Yes——" she hesitated this time, as if she remembered something that would make it difficult.

He saw it and considered; then as if to prevent any further embarrassment, he put down his cup and turned to her. "I've been speaking to your mother about—about what I said yesterday."

"Oh——!" she was dismayed.

"I've been telling her that it mustn't make any difference—and you must come and see us; we would go to Dulverton and Lynton—it's beautiful, quite as good as Italy—you'd like it."

"Of course we will—if we go to England." She was grateful; he felt it, and was pleased.

"That's right." He got up. "I shan't see you again; I start early. I'm going to Milan and then on to Genoa, and down the coast."

"Down the coast?"

He nodded. "I want to go and see an old friend"—Mrs. Roberts looked up, but she said nothing—"and to get to Viareggio; they burnt Shelley's body on the shore there. I don't suppose you ever read him?"

Kitty gave a little cry. "Oh, yes, yes—not all, but all I could."

He stared at her in wonder. "Well, I haven't since I was at Oxford. Miss Bateson talks a good deal about him, so perhaps it will keep her quiet if I go there for a day or two, though I never thought of it before."

"Why should you go because she talks about him?"

"I've always wanted to see places along that line. It's an excuse—then no one else will be able to worry me about him again. I can't stand poetry; I suppose it's bad taste. Besides, he was an atheist, and the two together—but we won't discuss that. Well, good-bye," he seemed to remember suddenly that he had stayed long enough. He shook hands with Mrs. Roberts, and held Kitty's for a moment. "You needn't be afraid; it's all right." He gave her a kindly little smile, and went slowly out of the room.

Kitty waited, listening, till she heard his footsteps going down the garden and the click of the gate. Then, though her mother did not notice it, for a moment she seemed to give herself up to a happy dream before she said gratefully, "I liked him to-day better than I ever did before. He's very slow, but he's very kind."

Mrs. Roberts smiled a little absently and opened her letter. It ran:

"WELL, MADAM,—I'm coming back at last. There have been many hardships and devilments, but some good times and interesting discoveries as well; but of these later. I shall post this in Lisbon. We arrive to-morrow, and go straight on to London. When I've shed the rags, dirt, and dishevelments of the expedition, and lumped a few tons of foolscap down containing accounts of what we've done, I shall get my hair cut, consider my manners, and come out to see you. I expect Kitty is a tall woman; she refused to sit on my knee last time; no doubt she will keep me at a greater distance still now. Tell her I've got a stuffed snake for her, and a few implements of torture and death. I kiss your hands.—As always, yours to command,

"FRANCIS WENDOVER."

She laughed and looked up at Kitty. "Mr. Wendover says he means to come out and see us when he has made himself respectable." She put the letter away in a pigeon-hole of the writing-table in the corner, and from the little shelf above it took down a volume of Shelley. On the first page was written, "From Jack," a date, the year of Kitty's birth, and the name of a place in Wales. She felt her heart leap once more as she stood reading it, and lived through the hour in which she had watched for the postman and seen him coming across the field at last—very little he had looked in the distance and slow of movement. He brought her a white packet tied with pink tape. She remembered it well, the look of it, the untying of the knot. She had kissed the volume before she opened it, for her lover had said much of it by heart to her; she knew what she most wanted to find, and stood reading it—

as she did now; but then, in that long ago, she saw the wonderful words in print for the first time, and drank in long draughts that gave her a sense of a door opening into another world of which she stood only on the threshold. Her father, good man that he was, had carefully edited her English reading; she had looked upon it as almost ponderous till that revelation came. With Italian poets he had not been so particular; in another language he thought she was not likely to understand, or to take harm by understanding; but her own tongue might prove a flame strong enough to scorch the whiteness of her soul: his business was to guard it.

The morning when her book came had been a little while before the crash, but a whole lifetime before Francis Wendover had first set eyes on her at Hallstatt. A corner of his letter caught her eye, and reminded her of the long faithful years since. "What nonsense people talk about friendship being impossible between a man and a woman," she thought, "it is quite possible; and a strength and comfort—to the woman at any rate."

A few hours later she stood with Kitty on the loggia watching the darkness shroud the mountains, deeper and deeper, while in the grey sky here and there a star revealed itself for a minute and went, then came again, as if it were looking down to see whether the earth were ready for all the myriads waiting to watch it through the night.

"Mother," the girl whispered, "I'm so happy—I hate myself for it—just after saying good-bye to Mr. Saxton—but I can't help it."

"Has anything happened?" Mrs. Roberts asked, in a whisper too; it was not the time for words that were spoken aloud.

"I'll tell you in the morning. You will see why—oh, darling, I know you will understand."

CHAPTER IV

MISS BATESON met Mr. Saxton on his way from the villa, but he looked preoccupied and avoided stopping to speak to her. She was disappointed, for she wanted to be amused. There was no one else at the hotel except the Signora Luchino, who had taken to her bed with toothache and refused to be comforted, and a couple of students from Novara, who could only speak their own language. She had done all the walks, not once but often, and quite suddenly she felt that Cannero had given her all it had to give. "The fact is," she thought, "it's time I went. If it wasn't for Mrs. Roberts and Kitty I'd start off to-morrow, and why I wait round them I don't know."

She was a pleasant little woman; without being very interesting she filled a distinct place in the remembrance of those who came across her. Her age was a secret well kept by her looks, which ran up and down the gamut between thirty and thirty-seven. She was slight, and her movements were singularly easy; she had brown hair rather meanly dressed, grey eyes quick to observe and often sparkling with humour, and a weather-beaten healthy complexion. There were some lines round her eyes, and deep freckles on the top of her small but definite nose. Perhaps her mouth, which presided over a neat chin, was her best feature, for though it was commonplace and the lips looked dry and hard, it went easily into a gay little smile that showed two rows of even teeth. Her dress was always tailor-made, well-fitting and short; her hat, a straw one

of the sailor shape; her shoes were thick but shapely; her hands small and brown, and decorated with a few worthless rings. She occasionally carried a pair of wash-leather gloves, but had never been known to wear them. Who she was no one asked nor cared to consider. She was Miss Bateson, going about alone; pleasant, able to take care of herself, spending her money easily but not extravagantly, ready to talk to any one who came along, never seeing a snub and rarely getting one. She was generally taken to be an American on account of her accent, which was a good deal the result of unconscious imitation of a manner and tone that had amused her, or struck agreeably on her ear. "It always sounds so fresh," she said.

"But surely you are an American?" an enterprising fellow-traveller asked.

"I don't know." On the last word there was the lingering, half-pathetic note for which she herself had often waited. "And I can't see that it matters. Americans love English things so much, and English people bring so much away from America, that it will be hard to say which is which soon."

"But weren't you born there?"

"This is how it was," she explained. "Father was English, and went out there and married mother—she was an American. He didn't do well, so he broke up home. Father took mother to England; we were there a long time. After she died he took us—my brother Darragh and me—to Canada. Father died there. Then grandfather sent for us to New York. We were there a long time, and Darragh took to writing for papers. Then grandfather died. Now Darragh has gone West and I'm in Europe. That's how it is."

"And you've been travelling ever since?" her listener asked, trying to disentangle the confused account.

"No; I lived in a boarding-house in Bloomsbury till I got tired of the people there—students going to the reading-room of the British Museum every day, scratching up the past, and coming back with nothing to say for themselves. They were like ghouls and got on my nerves, so I thought I'd come off for a bit and have a look at France and Italy, and when I got back I took a house to myself."

"And where's that?"

"Well, it's a good way from the British Museum, you may be quite sure," Miss Bateson answered, "though I just worship the outside of it; that was why I went to Bloomsbury—when you see it by moonlight, still and grey and dark, it looks like the tomb of all the secrets and all the greatness that has been on the earth. Well now, if you don't mind, I'll go for my walk." And she thought, as she went on her way, "I'm glad I didn't tell her where I lived; she might have come to see me, and I don't feel I want her."

She had come to Cannero a second time, not only because she liked it, but to see Mrs. Roberts and Kitty again. She had often thought of them, though chiefly with what she would have described as a pictorial interest. Mr. Saxton's acquaintance she had only made lately. They met at the Villa Elena the day after her arrival; afterwards, seeing that they were the only two English-speaking people at the hotel, it seemed natural that they should share the same table. Gradually it came about that they went for long walks together on the days when Kitty was not available. She never flagged of foot or tongue, though he stalked

along too preoccupied to give her more than an occasional monosyllable or a smile. The subject of her chatter was generally supplied by their surroundings, though sometimes she would hold forth concerning a book she had been reading or a place she had seen with a fluency, he said to himself, that suggested there wasn't anything else left on God's earth to discuss. This was how they had arrived at Shelley; it was doubtful if she had ever read a line of him till she went to Spezia, where she had stayed in a pension kept by an indigent lady. There, to use her own expression, she had "struck him," and become infatuated with everything concerning him to an extent that provided her with literary excitement for several weeks afterwards. She even carried about an edition of his works, intending to read them, but never finding time before the day when she left them somewhere—she thought it was in a waiting-room—and they vanished. The last embers of her interest in Shelley had been spent on Mr. Saxton, but she had no idea he had taken her seriously till he told her at the *table d'hôte* that he was going away the next morning to the places she had talked about.

"Just because of what I said—well!"

"I'll get it over," he answered, with a gleam of humour in his eyes, though he had been more silent than usual that evening. "It gives me an excuse to go to Sestri Levante; an old man lives there who was at Oxford with my father. I never knew him well, but I should like to see him once more."

"I know—it's a sort of religion to go and see some one who knew your father, though you used to think him rather a worry yourself. I feel that way about

people sometimes. I just hurry and get it over. I expect that's what you're going to do—only without the hurry?"

"That's it." He relapsed into stony silence.

"Something's wrong," Miss Bateson thought. "I shouldn't be surprised if he's been falling in love with Kitty Roberts. He can't expect a girl like that to fancy him; still, one never knows what men think about themselves."

She came down early the next morning. The hotel boy—there was no porter—went through the garden with the luggage-truck, the only thing on wheels belonging to Cannero; it creaked along the road down to the landing-stage to meet the early boat from Luino. When he came back it would be time to go again for the boat in the opposite direction. Mr. Saxton's luggage stood ready in the hall, two leather kit bags with his initials on the side—"L. S." She stopped in front of them. "I wonder what his name is?—dare-say now it's Lionel or Leonard—but he doesn't look like either," she thought. She had her coffee put on a table outside, under the wide sun-blind, by the window that commanded a view of the staircase, so that she might waylay him coming down. While she was waiting she looked across the flower-filled garden at the lake and the misty range beyond, and gave a gasp of satisfaction, for she too had a soul no less than Mrs. Roberts, though it was of a different variety. "Italy makes one in love with life—and death a holy dread"; she told herself; then the sound for which she was listening struck on her ear. Mr. Saxton was descending with his usual deliberation, as if he wanted to be quite sure of treading on the right portion of each stair.

"You'd better come and have your breakfast out here," she called to him. "You haven't much time; and you are really going, I know, for I looked at your luggage, but no one would think it from the leisurely way you take things. I'm always excited at starting anywhere; don't you ever lose your head at all?"

"No, I don't think so." He had seated himself by this time and ordered an omelette.

"Or feel that unless you went quicker the world would go on without you?"

"No, I think not." He poured out some coffee and considered the question. "I told Mrs. Roberts that you would get through it twice at the rate you went."

"Well now, I wonder. You are going in front of me to-day; but I was thinking yesterday that I'd be moving too. I went into the salon—isn't it ghastly, like a convent parlour and a waiting-room collaborating? If it wasn't for the piano it would be a tragedy——"

"Well?"

"Some one else had been there and left a *Times* on the table, and when I saw there was going to be opera next week and that Francis Wendover was back from his expedition, I wanted to go away that very moment."

"I should like to meet Wendover. Mrs. Roberts knows him."

"You could tell him that, speak to him, I mean—if you saw him anywhere."

"I think not. He mightn't like it."

"You can't tell; he might be delighted. I'd love to meet him."

Mr. Saxton went on with his breakfast in silence.

Through the still air they heard the gangway, which

was in two pieces, thrown on the landing-stage; it was always done with a loud clatter. In imagination Miss Bateson could see the boy waiting with his truck, and the little indolent group that usually watched for stray passengers. The women, with their washing-boards at the edge of the water on the left, would be there. They always were when the boats came in, as if to make the foreground of a picture, for immediately behind them the shore rose steeply and was laid out in short terraces of orange trees and trellised vineyards. She sighed, feeling that she would be sorry to leave the place. "But it has to be," she said aloud.

"What has?" He looked up with mild surprise.

"Leaving," she answered. "Doesn't matter how well you like a thing or place, the time comes when it ends."

He took some more omelette and said nothing.

"Don't believe he minds it a bit," she thought; "wish I hadn't said it. If he has any feelings, I believe he keeps them locked up so that he can't get at them." Then she came back to the situation in hand. "It's made it much better for me; your being here," she said; for it struck her that something polite was due to him. "I shouldn't have got through those walks alone." He gave her a faint smile for answer, and she went on again. "What I shall be most sorry to leave is Mrs. Roberts and Kitty."

"They're nice people." He woke up a little. "I told them that you meant to ask them to go and stay with you."

"Did you?" she beamed. "I've thought of it a good deal, but I'd forgotten I'd said it to you. They are the only people I ever wanted, but I've been afraid

to tell them so. Sometimes you feel as if there had been a snowstorm between you and Mrs. Roberts—at least I do—and though it had cleared up, there was a cold space left you couldn't get across. But now you've spoken to them, why, I'll try, you may be sure of that."

"I told them they must come to Dunster"; he stopped for a moment before he added, "you will have to bring them if they're with you."

"Now, wouldn't that be delightful." She opened the bag at her side. "Look here, this is my address in London in case I write and say we are coming—you really mean it?"

"Yes," he answered uneasily, remembering the last two days. He had walked hard at intervals, but without being able to shake off the remembrance of Kitty's girlish figure and dark head beside him along the mountain ways—it was usually turned towards the lake, while her little nose sniffed up the perfume of the spring. Perhaps Miss Bateson guessed for she suddenly put a leading question.

"Do you live all alone in Dunster, or wherever it is?"

"Yes; there isn't anybody else."

"I wonder you don't marry." There was no answer. "Haven't you ever thought of it?"

"Sometimes; but I don't see why a girl should want to marry me—do you?" He looked up rather quickly.

"Depends on the sort you want. I shouldn't think a very young girl would suit you; she ought to be—well, six-and-twenty."

"Then she's a woman."

"She's sure to be that at some time anyhow."

"I expect she is," he said thoughtfully; "but if I did marry at all I think I should like it to be a girl."

"Now I wonder why you think that?"

He broke a roll in two before he answered. "Well, you see, I should marry the girl; but if it were a woman—why, I should get married."

"You ought to have fallen in love with Kitty Roberts."

He helped himself to the last piece of omelette before he answered. "I did."

"Well?" She couldn't make up her mind whether, as she expressed it, anything had or hadn't happened.

"She would probably like a boy better," he said, and drew the butter nearer.

"It's wonderful how seriously men take their food," she thought. "I believe at this minute he would rather have his breakfast than marry Venus on a pedestal."

From the left, along the roadway, faintly, then nearer, came the creaking, creaking sound of the luggage-truck. It was in sight a minute later; the boy pushed it along slowly and in triumph. Following him came a tall well-set-up young man of two or three and twenty. He was extremely good-looking, brown-haired, and kind-eyed, of the well-tubbed, absolutely English type, and he walked like an athlete. Mr. Saxton saw him on the other side of the iron paling that divided the garden from the road.

"I should say that's the sort she'd like," he said, and thought of the coming of Lohengrin: it was one of the operas he had heard last winter.

The youth entered the gate, went up the steps and disappeared.

"He has arrived just at the right moment, perhaps."

She felt that it was unkind to say it, and tried to cover it up with, "I daresay he has only crossed over to breakfast before going on to Pallanza. He doesn't look like the sort that stays long in Cannero."

"No, I don't think he does," Mr. Saxton answered, and relapsed into silence.

He was very tiresome, she thought, why couldn't he talk more; but she had noticed that English people were often stolid and silent before a journey. She made another dash at him. "I'm struck with what you said about marriage just now; you seem to have thought about it anyway."

"It's curious, but most people do at some time, whether they accomplish it or not. Why aren't you married?"

"Well, you see, once I was poor. I wasn't wanted; the man went away and married money. I'm ever so content now, and wouldn't like to have my wings clipped. I don't think men have the least idea how much women like being free, so many things have opened up for them."

He was silent for a minute, then he said, "You are not poor now?"

"Oh, no." There was a little thrill in her voice. "I'm not poor now; but there are other things in the world besides money. I don't know what it is I'm looking for; I expect I'll find out—sometimes I've felt as if I got nearer when I was with Kitty Roberts."

"She's a dear child"; he was almost tender.

"I love them both; one is lucky when one can say that about the right people. It makes everything different; giving always does most for one—don't you think?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way." He looked at her in surprise. "I wish we could have talked longer, but it must be another time. We shall meet again——" a bell clanged on the lake.

"My goodness, there's your boat!" she exclaimed.

At the gate he looked back to give her a parting nod, and saw the stranger who had just arrived. He had always been in doubt about his own things, but this boy's get-up, from the texture of the homespun clothes, that had the comfortable look only hard wearing brings, to the straw hat, seemed to be just right for the place; it struck him, too, that he had an air of happy expectation. With a dull foreboding at his heart Mr. Saxton turned away. At one angle of the road he could see the Villa Elena. Some one was on the balcony; he raised his cap and hurried on, thinking of the tall slimness of the youth in the hotel doorway.

"Am on my way to you."

"But what does it mean, what led to it? You might have told me that before."

"Mother, it only means this—that we were great friends at Andermatt; we liked each other very much—I know we did—but he was going back to Oxford. When he went away he said we would leave it all—that I was just to trust him, and some day—when it could be—he would write. I should have told you, I should indeed—it wasn't that I didn't want you to know, but I couldn't speak—I tried, but your face looked so grave—Oh, you poor darling, you didn't know; but you've been unhappy and sometimes it makes you look severe, and I feel as if you were miles and miles off——"

"And has nothing happened since?"

"No, mother; I should have told you if it had. I've been waiting and waiting. I thought he'd forgotten, or didn't mean to come at all—no, I only pretended to think that, but it made me miserable. In my heart I knew he would come, but waiting wears one out."

"If I'd only known——"

"I couldn't tell you after that first day, the words wouldn't come: there are things one has to bear alone."

"I know—alone."

"But yesterday the telegram came, and to-day he'll come—I suppose it will be to-day, won't it? You'll be kind to him, mother dear, you'll like him so."

"He's a stranger——"

"He won't be—after two minutes, darling. You won't be one to him, he knows all about you—and about my father. I told him——"

Mrs. Roberts turned quickly. "What did you tell him?"

"Everything I could—how splendid he must have been."

"Splendid—how do you know that?"

"I can feel it. And he married you; it shows that he loved beautiful things—as you do—and all best things in the world. I'm so glad to be your child and his," she said with a long sigh, "I'm so thankful." The deep lines showed round her mother's mouth, the look that Kitty knew well had come to her eyes. "Oh, dear mother, forgive me," she cried, "and look happy again. I can't bear you not to be happy."

"But I am," Mrs. Roberts answered absently; "the life here has been heaven to me. I wonder if he is good enough—this boy I mean?"

"He isn't quite a boy; he's twenty-three remember," Kitty said grandly.

"I'm glad he isn't older—he hasn't had time to love any one else first."

"Oh, no." It was such a strange thing for her mother to say.

"You didn't know him very long."

"A whole month—longer. We saw each other every day. Think how much it counts, mother dear, more than if I'd seen him twice a week for three months, and I've thought about him so much."

"One gets to know people better in one's thoughts sometimes than when one is with them."

"Oh," with a long sigh, "I feel as if I know him better than any one in the world."

Suddenly, to their dismay, a little figure entered—

compact and trim, and smiling as usual. Kitty sprang to her feet; Mrs. Roberts looked embarrassed, for a moment almost dazed.

"Don't know what you'll think of me walking in at this time," Miss Bateson said; "but I just had to come, for half an hour ago I made up my mind I'd go away this afternoon, and I couldn't without saying good-bye, that's certain."

"Of course not." Kitty tried hard to be natural.

"Besides, I have some news and I thought I'd come while it was fresh."

"News?"

"Well, yes. Mayn't I sit down for five minutes?" she pleaded, and without waiting for an answer, settled herself in a basket chair and adjusted her sailor hat. "It's rather mean of me to tell you, perhaps; it's always a good thing to put off anything you don't want to hear, as long as possible, but it fits in with something I've got in my mind, and I can't keep it back."

"We hoped you were going to stay another week," Mrs. Roberts said, trying not to betray the impatience she felt; for she liked Miss Bateson, and if she seemed cold or distant while she talked to her a little smile generally lurked in the corner of her mouth, or looked out of her eyes, and apologised for it.

"Well, I was; but it'll be quiet now Mr. Saxton has gone—we had some most interesting talks. He's dull of course."

"He's very kind," put in Kitty.

"Oh, yes, my word, he's kind and good as gold—there isn't a wrong spot in him from end to end, I should say—in fact he's a dear man; but he's dull and hasn't much to say for himself. Perhaps it is because

when he walks he seems fully taken up with carrying himself along; and when he sits as if he were rather sorry for what he would have to do when he got up—all the same I like him. We were talking about you both this morning at breakfast. He wants you to go and see him in Somersetshire."

"We're not likely to go to England," Mrs. Roberts said.

"Don't you ever want to go?"

"No—o." There was hesitation in the voice.

"I think one hears one's own country calling sometimes; I do—only I'm not quite sure which it is, for father was English and mother American. That's why."

"It's a little awkward," Mrs. Roberts answered while her eyes wandered to the acacia trees in the garden; they were higher than the window. "We are so content here," she added with a tender smile to them.

"And it's too lovely for words to see you—you two—framed round by this place like a picture, or like a poem that hasn't got into a book. Why you're only a little way off from the world, yet you know nothing about it."

"I don't think we want to know more."

"Well—but there's Kitty? And though you are just as young still as you ever will be, and have seen more than she has, it's about time you had another look round—if you don't mind my saying so. There's a good deal going on at the works, and it's a pity to miss it."

"The works?" Kitty asked.

"Why, yes, places like London and New York, they are the works of the world. It often seems to me that

people think too much about just their own lives, and too little about the world, and what is doing in it; but I must get to what I came to say. The Signora Luchino has been at the hotel three days now."

"I heard about her," Mrs. Roberts said.

"She's been in bed with a toothache. It's ridiculous for a large woman, as she is, to stay in bed with a little thing like that, but still there she's been till this morning. Just now, after Mr. Saxton had gone, she came down, and when I saw her having her coffee, I thought perhaps a little sympathy would do her good."

"It was very kind of you." Mrs. Roberts knew perfectly the form that sympathy had taken.

"Well, she told me she was coming to see you this afternoon, and thinks what she has to say may be inconvenient. She's going to ask you to let her have the villa again—end of May, I think, or before. I'm afraid it'll be a worry." She looked round at the dainty drawing-room, at the white matting and rugs, the books, and the autotypes of pictures they remembered. "You'll have to do something with your things," she continued in a practical voice. "I expect they can be stored if you want to come back again, but meanwhile you'll have to go somewhere else, and I've been wishing you'd come to England."

"I do so long to go," Kitty broke in. "Oh, mother, couldn't we? It's our country, and my father's." She turned to Miss Bateson. "He lived there all his life—he was only in Italy for a little while. We are English too. I always think of it as home, and hear it calling, as you say you do your country."

Mrs. Roberts looked at her with surprise. "I didn't know you felt so strongly about it."

"You never know what people lock up in their hearts," Miss Bateson said, "especially girls. I remember how I used to go right up to an empty room at the top of grandfather's house in New York, and have it out with myself when I wanted things I didn't get and knew it would be no good talking about; when I came down again no one guessed. I am glad you feel that way, Kitty," she went on with more depth than usual in her voice, "for what I want you to do is to come over and stay with me. I told Mr. Saxton so; you should have seen his face light up."

"It's very kind of you," Mrs. Roberts began.

"It isn't a bit—don't call it that, for I'd just love to have you and to show Kitty round. I live quite alone. I've only one brother, no one else in the world belonging to me; and he's out West writing a book about it. He thinks it a tragedy they're building cities there; but places must be made for people to live in, there are so many born now. He's a crank and there's an end of it, and perhaps I'm one; but I know this—I should simply love it if you and Kitty would come over and stay with me!"

"But if we go to England," Mrs. Roberts explained, "I think we should have to stay with my aunt in Brook Street."

"Lady Burfield? Mr. Saxton told me she was here once. You'd much better come to me, you'd be freer; relations always want to know where you are going, and what you are doing—there's nothing so curious as relations."

"Aunt Robin's not like that," Kitty interposed.

"Well you can go and see her, and have her to see you as much as you like. But you can't think how

happy I should be if you would come and stay with me—the house is plenty large enough—and I'm all alone—I have been alone since grandfather died in New York." Miss Bateson got up. "I want you to think it over and write to me, for I must pack if I'm to get off by the two o'clock boat."

"You are going so suddenly."

"I know, but it's always a pity to waste too much time considering about things you are certain to do. When I saw Mr. Saxton's luggage in the hall I couldn't help wishing my trunks were there. There's a great deal in knowing when to go away, and I think I've been here long enough considering the size of Cannero. I love a quiet little place, but after a while I feel I've got to go on to keep myself alive. It's a rest being here, but one can have too much rest. I expect we'll all find that out when we're dead."

"Why have you stayed so long?" Mrs. Roberts was wondering if Mr. Saxton had been the attraction.

Then Miss Bateson turned to her suddenly. "I believe I came here, unknown to myself, because I wanted to see you and Kitty again, and I've stayed on because I've just loved you both. I think you're like nothing else in the world I've ever seen. That's why I want you to come over and be with me; I'd be so happy—I'd feel as if you liked me."

"I do," Mrs. Roberts was taken by surprise, "but I'm not sure that we are going to England."

"We are," Kitty said; "I know we are—I can feel it."

"Then it's settled." Miss Bateson was quite pleased. "I'll write directly I get back. I'm not sure where I'll be for a few days, but I'll get to Basle

to-morrow; I always think it's a good place to make up your mind in—expect I'll be in London by next week anyhow." She turned to go and stopped. "By the way, there's the handsomest young man you ever saw at the hotel, arrived two hours ago. When you hear that, you'll think he ought to be dried and hung up for a schoolgirl's hero"—Kitty prepared to look indignant—"or novelists to copy for their books, but he isn't a bit that sort; he looks just as manly as he's high—which is six feet, I should say—and as if he'd been out in the open air a good deal, and didn't think about himself. I told Mr. Saxton he would take his place here—dare say he is aching with jealousy by this time."

"Who is he?" Mrs. Roberts asked.

"I don't know." She made a little cadence of the words. "But he has initials on his bags. I always look at initials—sometimes give you a clue."

"What are they?"

Miss Bateson saw the colour mount to Kitty's face and grasped the situation in a moment. "Well now—let me see," she hesitated out of sheer mischief, "they are—yes, that's it—they're H. K."

"It's Mr. Kerriston," Mrs. Roberts said calmly; "we didn't know he would come quite so early."

"Well it's evident I made a good shot, and that you'll find him very interesting," Miss Bateson answered unabashed. "I must get along to the post-office and tell them about sending on my letters."

"Oh, do let me go for you!" Kitty entreated, feeling that she must escape somewhere into the open. "You have your packing to do, and mother has a letter to go. Is it ready, dearest?"

Miss Bateson hesitated till a comprehending look

came into her eyes. "Well, it would be very kind of you to tell them to send anything that comes to-night on to Lucerne—Poste Restante—and to-morrow to the "Three Kings" at Basle. It's a long way from the station, and I feel more comfortable in little cheap places, but I go there because I like to look at the Rhine. And you might say I'll wire further when I know what I'm going to do."

In a minute Kitty had gone, thankful to be under the sky, and for a few minutes at least by herself. She fled through the garden and the cherry orchards, and by the narrow ways beyond, to the post-office, in order to avoid passing the hotel. Harry was probably having a late breakfast, she thought, and wondering how to manage a visit to the villa; but now that she knew he was near and would seek her, the woman's instinct of running away asserted itself.

Miss Bateson looked after her with a smile. "I'm sorry you'll have the worry of moving, but—well, I won't say what I think. I'll tell you again, now we are alone, that I've liked seeing you and Kitty better than anything else in Cannero, and if you'd stay with me in London you'd do me a real kindness. You can't think how much I enjoy life, going about and seeing places and knowing I can do what I like; but I haven't any one to worry over—I mean the worry that makes you happy—and sometimes I feel like a waif in the world. I wouldn't if you and Kitty were there in the house with me for a bit." Her voice was almost sad.

"If we go to England we should like to stay with you," Mrs. Roberts said, and took the outstretched hands; it seemed as if all the snow had melted—and Miss Bateson was satisfied.

"But I didn't say good-bye to Kitty," she remembered as she stood by the door. "Think she'd come round and say it? But perhaps she'll be too busy."

"Of course she will—or she'll go down to the landing-stage and see you off."

Thank Heaven Miss Bateson had gone at last, Mrs. Roberts thought, though her heart had warmed to her in the last half-hour. She wanted to be alone to think in peace over this strange day in which all the years were being uprooted and the life she had clung to so tenaciously swept away. The news about the Signora Luchino was bewildering; it had not occurred to her that the villa would be wrested from her. She must have known that it would be some day, if she had allowed herself to think about it, but she had lived in the present, wholly content, not daring to look forward. And then Kitty and this boy, Harry Kerriston—what was going to happen? She was afraid to think. She put her hands over her eyes, and half-dazed, rested her head down on the end of the couch and waited.

Thus an hour passed; one that she remembered and looked back upon through all the after days. In it a long chapter of life ended.

There was a sound in the garden beneath, of young and happy voices speaking to each other, a little scrunching of gravel, as of footsteps coming over it. She raised her head, listened for a moment, and sprang to her feet.

Then the door opened and Kitty entered, and half hesitatingly, half afraid, a tall young man followed her in. The expression of his face was charming; it

was impossible not to feel that a delightful nature was behind it, perfectly manly, yet modest and unaffected. Mrs. Roberts looked at them silently for a moment and thought that it would have been strange if they had not fallen in love with each other.

"Mother!" Kitty went up to her—she looked proud and flushed, and the light was in her eyes. "Mother dear," she repeated with a little gasp, "this is Harry Kerriston."

"How do you do?" Mrs. Roberts said, prosaically enough, while a blessed sense of relief took possession of her; there was nothing to fear from this nice boy. "I heard that you had arrived," she added for the sake of saying something.

"I telegraphed yesterday—it was very bold of me," he answered. A happy smile looked out of his eyes and his voice was just what she expected it to be. "I have been wanting to come for months."

There was an awkward pause while they stood looking at each other—the little group of three, whose lives had reached a crisis. Then Kitty broke in with a happy, frightened voice: "Mother, Harry wants me to be engaged to him."

Mrs. Roberts made a sudden backward movement.

"Oh," came from her lips, "not yet——" She felt as if the tide were overtaking her.

"I don't know what you'll say, nor how I've dared to do it," he said diffidently, "for you never saw me till this minute."

She gave him a long, searching look, anxious and questioning. He looked back at her and thought how beautiful she was; it went through him that he would be proud of her, this mother of Kitty—of belonging to

her. "It has come so suddenly," she said, "I heard about last summer, but I didn't think it had gone so far."

"I know," he answered, in a voice of self-reproach.

"Are you quite sure that you love each other—enough?" Her voice seemed to be giving out.

He made a little sound that was more than words.

"And I am quite sure," Kitty said softly, wondering at the contradiction on her mother's face—the happy, bewildered smile and the anxious, almost scared, expression of her eyes.

"But your father—your people?" Mrs. Roberts asked, looking up at him breathlessly.

"There is only my father. He has always wanted me to marry early. It will be all right—he's splendid."

"Does he know?"

"Not yet. I didn't want to tell him till I was quite sure of her, and I couldn't be that," again his voice charmed her; "but I told him I was coming out to see you. You needn't be afraid; he'll be awfully fond of her."

"I'm going to write directly, if you'll say it's all right."

She looked up at him again and thought how handsome he was. "You're so young." It was only to make time, to prolong these moments in which her child seemed to be slipping away from her.

"I'm twenty-three."

"She's only eighteen."

"You were married at eighteen, mother dear."

They made such a delightful picture standing there, gloriously young and happy, breaking down the little fences she raised—while the sunlight came into the

room under the stretched sun-blind, and the scent from the orange trees and acacias, and the blueness of the lake, appealing and seeming to know—that she wondered if she were awake, and looked at them again to make sure they were there, that it was true. A lump came to her throat and tears threatened her eyes, but she forced them back and slowly a look of thankfulness broke over her face. They were waiting for her to speak. "We shall both grow older," he pleaded demurely.

She thought of Mr. Saxton's argument and laughed. "I suppose you will—and I like you," she added impulsively. Her voice was happy; it sounded young—as if she had met her youth journeying back.

Kitty heard it and her heart bounded. "Mother knows," she thought; "what a dear she is." She strengthened Harry's remark with, "we shall grow much older, you know."

"Yes, I suppose you will," Mrs. Roberts answered. "It's a pity, for youth is so wonderful——" but still she hesitated.

"I'll do all I know to make her happy," he urged, in a low, eager voice that was full of tenderness. "I'm not half good enough for her—or for you. She told me so much about you last year"—he hesitated, and added almost in a whisper, "and about her father too."

As if her strength were giving way she went back a step and sat down on the sofa behind her. "I can feel that you love her," she said, and held out her hands. He took them and hesitated; he saw her eyes, and then—the manner of it was perfect—he stooped and kissed her.

"You must let me love you too," he said.

"Mother, dearest," Kitty said an hour or two later when they were alone, "do tell me what you think of him—that you like him—that you will love him?"

Mrs. Roberts laughed at her vehemence and looked at the dear face lighted up with happiness. "Yes, yes," she answered, "I can quite forgive you. And love him? I almost do that already. But it has come with such a rush I have no intellect at all to-day. Have you been thinking of him, caring for him all this time? Are you sure?"

"Yes, mother, I'm quite sure. There is no one like him. I should have died if he hadn't come."

Mrs. Roberts looked at her keenly. "It shall be—it shall be," she said passionately to herself.

"He has been in my thoughts every hour since Andermatt, but I couldn't tell you after the first day, when I was afraid. Oh, I can't believe it's true." The sweet lips quivered for a moment. "Will it always be as happy as this?"

"I hope so." Mrs. Roberts looked down at her again and the lines on her face, deep and sad, that sometimes haunted Kitty, showed plainly. But they vanished in a moment. "Yes, dearest, yes," she said. "It will be—must be—it couldn't be anything else with that nice boy."

Then Kitty was radiant again. "But he isn't really a boy, he's twenty-three—twenty-three."

"Of course, twenty-three," her mother laughed.

When Miss Bateson reached the landing-stage she found Kitty there, and just behind her was the tall figure of Harry Kerriston. "Well, this is nice!" she

exclaimed. "I wouldn't have missed seeing you for anything."

"I wanted to come and—I've brought someone else."

"I saw him arrive this morning. I expect he'll like Cannero." She put more accent than usual into her voice and looked at him with approval. The boat had come to a standstill, there were only two minutes for adieux.

Kitty put an end to the hesitation again, with shy directness. "Dear Miss Bateson," she said, while the colour came to her face and made her look enchanting. "I want you to know that we are engaged."

"I guessed it the moment I saw you together." Miss Bateson was delighted. "Why, you must be the happiest man on earth." She turned to Harry and held out her hand.

"I am," he said, and shook it.

"She's lovely."

"She is," he answered gaily.

"They're coming to stay with me in London; isn't that lovely for you? And it never struck me till this instant," Miss Bateson added with sudden consternation, "that I didn't give her my address. It's written down here." She opened a little bag hooked on to her waist and pulled out some insurance coupons cut from an illustrated paper. "It's there, Mr. Kerriston, and it isn't much trouble to remember. But I must hurry or I shall be left behind. I always carry two or three of those coupons with me; then if I'm drowned or killed on the railway I'll get a funeral and no one the worse for it. You'll be sure to remember it. Don't you want to write it down?" for he had just looked at the slip and given it back.

"I'll remember and write it down afterwards, but I'm afraid you ought to go," he added regretfully: the man by the gangway was waiting and making signs.

She turned quickly. "Good-bye, my dear Kitty," embracing her fervently. "I'm just as happy as if I were going to marry him myself."

"I'm not," he put in deftly.

"It was real good of you to come and tell me, and now that I've seen him, why"—she shook hands with him hurriedly—"why, Mr. Kerriston, I believe she will be as happy as you will."

"I hope so—but that's saying a great deal."

They stood on the landing-stage waving their hands in response to her fluttering handkerchief, till she was a hundred yards away.

"Are her people over here?" he asked.

"I don't think she has any—she lives all alone."

"What, in Berkeley Square—she must be rich."

"Must she?" Kitty said innocently, for all localities were the same to her. "I don't think she knows it if she is, or cares."

CHAPTER VI

By a little gentle diplomacy Lady Burfield was going to Cannero without her husband. Sir James Burfield, knighted by accident rather than for any particular merit, had made up his mind to celebrate his retirement from practice by a somewhat professional holiday—to Heidelberg first, where he had been a student in his youth and still knew a couple of professors; then on to Lemberg, whither a distinguished Polish doctor had invited him. The programme did not commend itself to his wife, who was longing to escape restrictions and had no fancy for German living and academical dissipations. Let it be explained that she had not met her sedate and somewhat massive husband till she was forty, and he fifty; hence in spite of a really genuine affection for each other, they had not yet recovered from the strangeness of marriage, and each felt, and hoped the other did not know it, that there was sweetness in an occasional spell of freedom. She saw the possibility of one when he suggested the cumbersome journey his heart desired.

"My dear, I've been to Heidelberg six times," she laughed; for she was a cheerful lady and diplomatic. "I've seen the castle illuminated on each occasion, and have been duly thrilled at the moment when it and the bridge turned red. I should know them both upside down on any highway I met them."

"It is a charming place in my opinion," he urged, with the slight pomposity of manner that characterised

him; "some of my most agreeable memories are bound up in it. I like to think that the last one connects itself with you—and our honeymoon."

"It would be such a pity for me to disturb it"—she gave him a charming smile—"to dilute it with any other. And, as I say, even before we went, dear"—she always called him dear when she wanted her own way, and he, unaccustomed till he married to anything approaching sentiment (he had been the younger son of a prosperous attorney), always welcomed the word with a little unconscious gratitude—"I have been there so often that there can't be an excursion or a beer-garden that doesn't know me; or a middle-aged man, who was once a student, who hasn't passed me in its streets or seen me in its cake shops."

"He would find it impossible to forget you."

"You would take a high prize for politeness, my James." He gave her a gracious smile. "And then, Lemberg—why the very sound of it is dull—that is, if you are a foolish woman and not a clever man; it is a place for the learned." There was no doubt about her adroitness.

"The University is very interesting."

"I'm sure of it," she answered; "but they talk Polish—or mostly Polish; I should be dumb. Besides, there is an Armenian cathedral there, and everything Armenian suggests an atrocity."

"What is it you want me to do?" he asked patiently.

"To go all by your lone, my James. Think of the dinners you could eat and the beer you could drink, with no wife to keep an eye on you or shake her head."

Strangely enough, this had also occurred to him. His particular weakness was easily suggested by his

amplifying figure; but his wife had a small appetite and a curious faculty for doing without food for hours together: it had caused him some regrets.

"I should miss you, my dear," he said solemnly.

"Yes, but how delighted you would be to see me when you took your way back to—to the top of any Swiss mountain you please, dear lord and master, where you think it well we should settle down for the summer," she said, with a little sigh, "and I should like you to miss me."

Sir James looked at her indulgently again; she had a delightful nature, he thought; he had done well in marrying her, and she was really a woman—he often repeated that to himself, though no one had thought of doubting it. There was no nonsense about her, no assumption of perfect equality; the very epithet she had just applied to him was pleasant. She had no sympathy with suffragettes or platform antics, as he called them; her interest in politics took its cue from his; she was intelligent but not intellectual. And she knitted a great deal—grey stockings usually—they always dangled from her needles at one particular length and never seemed to be finished (though they were, as his legs attested): he liked to see women engaged on feminine employments. Besides, she was such a nice-looking woman; he was proud of her, and didn't wonder that he had fallen in love with her after his own slow and deliberate fashion—fairly tall, held herself well, neither portly nor angular, a kindly face that was thinner in proportion than the rest of her, a ready happy smile, abundant dark hair, sufficiently grizzled to be picturesque, and large white hands to which the knitting-needles drew attention.

"I shall certainly miss you, and am always delighted to see you," he answered, "and we'll do whatever you like." For since she never appeared to drive him, he made it a point of giving way to her suggestions when it was possible. "But where will you go now? I shouldn't be happy at leaving you in London."

"Oh, no, James," she said in a deprecating manner, "and I shouldn't like it without you." She looked up at him and smiled, and wondered why his dear head was so fat. "What I should really like to do would be to go and see Helen and Kitty."

He considered for a moment; he felt bound to do that before giving his approval to a sudden proposal, whether he jumped to it or not. "Rather far for you to travel alone?" He always maintained that in spite of their courage women could never really take care of themselves; it amused her when she remembered the jaunts of her spinster days.

"But we can go part of the way together, and be sentimental when we see the Rhine from the railway carriage," she urged. "We shall probably be in the restaurant most of the time we are passing it; we were before—on our wedding journey." She gave him another smile.

"Ah," he repeated, with a benevolent one back at her, "on our wedding journey."

"And you gave me Howells's novel—it was on the bookstall at Bonn—you adroit one—when you got out to buy some fruit."

He almost purred, for he liked being chaffed—in not too familiar a manner. "I thought the title appropriate. Let me see—where was Helen Roberts then?"

"At Hallstatt."

"Of course, I remember; a little place isn't it, but so is Cannero."

"I know; and they've only had Mr. Saxton lately—he was rather dull, you know—and that Miss Bateson. It would really be a kindness to go and see them."

"If you went without me Helen could put you up, which would be better than staying alone at the hotel," he remarked thoughtfully; he liked arranging details for other people.

"Of course, and I could go and see Carones; I'm devoted to him." Carones was the hotel landlord, a creature with a grey head and short shaggy beard.

"You really would like to go to Cannero?" he asked after a pause, as if he had been weighing the mighty question.

"Yes, James," she answered, and meekly waited, as if for his indulgent consent.

"On the whole, it seems to me an excellent idea. I don't think I should care to go there again myself; the living is very fair, but I'm not sure that it suited me, and I've no doubt you and Helen would like to be together without me."

She gave her head a little shake, and went on with her knitting. "It would be the best way of spending the time," she said in a tone that implied it would have to be got through somehow. "And Helen will be so glad to see some one belonging to her."

"If I were you, I wouldn't tell them of your intention; it would be a pleasant surprise if you were to walk in one afternoon."

"It would," she agreed, and thought that when a man was such an old angel as Sir James he deserved to be humoured.

This was why Mrs. Roberts had no idea that Lady Burfield was about to descend upon her. When the letter arrived which Kitty posted during Miss Bateson's farewell visit, to which there was a hurried postscript—"Mr. Kerriston has telegraphed to Kitty. He is coming here."—the luggage was being piled on a four-wheeler at the Brook Street door. Lady Burfield read it on her way to Victoria, and told her husband of it in the train. "I'm not surprised," she said; "he was evidently very much in love with her last summer."

Sir James became thoughtful. "It's very curious," he said, "but I had an idea that something would come of it, and I forgot to tell you that two days ago Sir George Kerriston wrote that he was coming to London and would like to call upon me—I thought he meant professionally. I answered that I was very sorry but I was just leaving England. I've not seen him for years—very odd he should write suddenly."

"Perhaps he wanted to ask about Kitty."

"Quite possible, for he said 'my son much enjoyed seeing you and your young relation last year at Andermatt.'"

"That's it," Lady Burfield answered sagaciously; "I'm glad I'm going." She took out her knitting, counted the stitches on her needle, and was silent for a quarter of an hour. He supposed that a stocking was a thing that needed concentration, and had too much respect for it to interrupt. She was unusually thoughtful during the whole journey. Her husband was touched, for he fondly imagined that she was anxious about him; but he was mistaken. She knew that he was quite able to take care of himself and would enjoy being alone—as she would.

"What sort of a man is Sir George Kerriston?" This was the next day in the railway carriage an hour before they parted at Mannheim, where she was to drop him to catch his train for Heidelberg, while she went on to the inevitable Basle, to break her journey there before going over the St. Gotthard to Italy.

"I almost forget—he was not very tall, I think, but not bad looking; he had a long, fair moustache."

"Sounds rather nice," she said absently, and regretted it, for Sir James's moustache was stubbly and dark.

"It was a little untidy looking," he answered carelessly. "A very young man for his age I remember now—with a somewhat severe manner."

"Severe?" She caught at the word.

"Probably it was only manner—he was in India a good many years. When his brother died he retired and settled down in Oxfordshire. Surely you remember him; he dined with us shortly after we were married."

"Fifteen years ago, dear James, and I saw such thousands of men, all of them middle-aged and most of them doctors—though as he wasn't one I might have remembered—and so many of them gave us silver inkstands as a wedding gift—he did; but I can't sort out the givers or the gifts in my memory."

"By the way, what has become of them? I only remember four about the house."

"They are in the strong room—there are several left. They've been most useful, really a comfort; and saved us so much trouble."

"Perhaps Kitty would like one or two if she marries this boy? He would be an excellent match for her,

By the way, did you see in the paper that Wendover had come back?"

"Of course."

"He's a brilliant man."

"I shouldn't be surprised if he goes out to see them."

"I can't think why Helen buries herself as she does," Sir James said, after a pause. "She hasn't been to England since we married."

"Not for more than seventeen years." Lady Burfield quickened her knitting. "It would be better if she came back now. I shall try and persuade her."

"You say her husband was a charming fellow, but I have always felt that there was a screw loose somewhere; and it's strange there should be no relation but you to look after her."

"Well, I'm fairly near—he was my nephew. Why should you think there was a screw loose? People die off, in spite of medical genius; besides, we never ran to large numbers in our family." She counted her stitches a little abruptly. Sir James had a vague feeling of being snubbed and deserving it. He soon recovered, and gave her, in a kindly but slightly peremptory manner, directions for the continuance of her journey without him. She listened with a grateful smile, and forgot them the next minute. At Mannheim she begged him to take care of himself, and to have a really good dinner that evening. Then she kissed her hand and waved her handkerchief to him from the carriage window, and her heart felt as light as a feather as she went on her way alone.

A curious little coincidence happened at Basle. She arrived late at night and saw no one. When she was departing early the next morning a little woman in a coat

and skirt and a sailor hat was in the hall of the hotel speaking about sending on her letters to England. She passed Lady Burfield's bundle of wraps, ready to be carried out, and her eye rested a moment on the neat little luggage label—

“BURFIELD, CANNERO, MAGGIORE.”

“Why!” and she bustled up, “you must excuse me for speaking, but I see you are going to Cannero; I came from there two days ago, and I'm sorry I left it.”

“Oh, yes, I'm going there; it's a charming place.”

Lady Burfield was surprised and always ready to be amused; but her train went in twenty minutes, and the omnibus door was being held open.

The little woman followed her to it. “I'm going the other way—wish I'd seen you before. I expect you are going to Mrs. Roberts's?”

“Yes—she's my niece.” Lady Burfield was settling herself on her seat.

“And she's just lovely! You'll get some surprising news when you see her.”

“Oh?” She leant forward eagerly, but the door was shut. The driver cracked his whip. “Tell me at once,” she cried.

“For one thing, she is going to leave the villa in less than two months, and coming to stay with me in London.”

“With you—what is your name?”

Lady Burfield gasped with astonishment; but the wheels rattled over the stones. They had started.

“Bateson—she knew me quite well. Kitty——” The rest was lost, for the driver hurried up his horses. There was only just time to get to the station.

CHAPTER VII

LADY BURFIELD was quite excited. She forgot the news concerning the villa and that Helen Roberts was going to London, in fact didn't believe it, and fastened her thoughts on the last word Miss Bateson had uttered—"Kitty." Harry Kerriston had probably arrived by this time, and matters were reaching a crisis. But it was of Kitty's mother she thought most, for it was astonishing how much she loved her; she was only her aunt by marriage, and, as a matter of fact, she had seen very little of her. She could hardly control her impatience during the long train journey. When at last she found herself on board the steamer she walked the whole length of it twice with relief and satisfaction at being so near her destination, and stepped on shore at Cannero with an elasticity that would have done credit to a girl. Then she stood for a few moments looking at the place with sheer delight. It was washing day; she remembered it on her last visit, and the surprise of her husband, who had nevertheless inspected the result with interest. Once a fortnight a line was slung from tree to tree along the lower road; on it sheets and table-linen and many and various garments were hung to dry; she remembered how white they had looked, how sweet they had smelt, and was glad to come upon the primitive custom again. She saw her luggage being collected on the dilapidated truck, and sped along, under the trees, beside the lake, past the café, where three years ago they used to drink coffee after dinner, past the Hôtel d'Italia, with its green bal-

conies, on to the Villa Elena. In the garden was a profusion of roses and tall flowering trees. "How happy it looks!" she said to herself. "After all, if humanity has its sorrows, the green earth offers it compensations." The remark was not her own, though she felt it to be true. It was an argument Mrs. Roberts had used in a letter long ago, when she insisted that if she was to know any sort of happiness again it must be in sight of the mountains and where the world was beautiful.

She unlatched the gate softly: she wanted the surprise to be complete. There was no occasion to knock or ring, the door stood open; for in Cannero they have no thought of thieves who break in and steal. She went softly upstairs to the first floor, and entered the drawing-room. It was empty; the little yacht piano was open; on the writing-table letters and papers were scattered about—some one had been using it lately. The chintzes were fresh and light; there were copper pots with boughs of acacia in them, and pots of native ware full of wildflowers: it seemed appropriate they should be so housed. "What a charming room it is!" she thought, and sat down, as if to take in a sense of the life that was lived there, while a little exclamation escaped her lips. Mrs. Roberts, sitting in the loggia, on a low basket-chair hidden round the corner, evidently heard it, for she rose quickly and looked towards the room. "Aunt Robin!" She sprang forward. "Oh, how lovely! I believe I knew you'd come—and I've wanted you so."

"I knew you did. My dear, it's a perfect joy to see you again."

"Why didn't you tell me? I should have had the antic-

ipation. But it doesn't matter; you are here. You came by that boat of course?" Mrs. Roberts nodded to it as it went past the villa. "Where's your luggage?"

"Coming."

"And Uncle James?"

"Gone to Heidelberg alone," Lady Burfield explained, with a chuckle. Then she looked at her niece. They were sitting on the sofa—the one between the loggia and the balcony—grasping each other's hands. "You're looking very well," she said; "happier than I have ever seen you, and so young, you might be—well—thirty-four."

"In six months I shall be thirty-eight: it's an awful age."

"You are as beautiful as ever." A smile came to Mrs. Roberts's lips; the elder woman always laid traps for it, and knew that a compliment would catch it.

"No, Aunt Robin, I'm quite ugly now. I found two grey hairs a month ago, and there are crow's feet round my eyes. But you haven't asked about Kitty."

"It's unnecessary," Lady Burfield answered triumphantly. "Of course the Kerriston boy is here? Where are they?"

"Gone up to 'the other country'—they can't be back for an hour or two."

"What a comfort; we shall get a talk. They were thoroughly in love last summer. I thought he wouldn't get over it."

"Aunt Robin, they are engaged! Oh, wait——" There was the fuss of the luggage arriving. They heard it creaking up the garden path, and Luigi discoursing with the boy. "It shall be taken to your

room," Mrs. Roberts said. "I must tell them to get it ready, to bring some tea, and you shall hear everything while they are doing it." She came back to the sofa in two minutes. "They're engaged, Aunt Robin," she repeated.

"When?"

"Four days ago now. I can't help being happy. Perhaps that's why I look young. They're in the seventh heaven; but oh——" She drew a long breath and almost gasped. "I haven't told him—I can't——"

"You'll have to tell him. I should get it over as soon as possible."

"I can't. He shall never know if I can help it; neither shall Kitty."

Lady Burfield looked up quickly. "My dear, he must, and I think Kitty ought. She is old enough now."

"I can't do it——" She stopped for a moment, and then went on quickly in a low, husky voice: "Last summer, when she stayed with you at Andermatt and you told me they were beginning to like each other, it came upon me almost like an avalanche, the sense that she would have to know, that all her dreams and illusions concerning her father had to be swept away—she has made him such a hero. That was why I hurried down from Trarego and telegraphed. I wanted her back before anything definite was said. When she didn't come I wrote to Mr. Godstone. He knew Jack; he has known us all——"

"Of course."

"I told him what I feared was happening—how it had come suddenly upon me that, of course, Kitty would marry; and that in spite of the promise I had given her father she would have to know, she and her husband,

and the calamity it would be to her, the misery to me——” She broke off, and went on passionately: “It would be torture to tell Kitty. I should feel that I was killing something in her.”

“Poor thing, you make too much of it. After all, he did it on an impulse. It isn’t as if he had been a bad man. He had a charming nature——”

“It’s the deed by which he will be judged. His nature! Oh, what will people know about that? What would they care? It’s like a potter; what do people know about him when he is dead?” Her fingers were touching a jar, filled with wild flowers, that stood on a stool at the end of the couch. “But the thing the potter makes often stays on and on in the world, whether it is well or ill done, and stares one in the face.”

“You mustn’t become mystical, dear Helen. You have been reading Omar Khayyam,” Lady Burfield said tenderly. “It’s a frame of mind that may lead one anywhere.”

“Oh, I’m not mystical. But why should Kitty be made unhappy? Why shouldn’t she know only the best and dearest of her father, and love that?”

“My dear, if people do wrong their children have to suffer.”

“It’s a wicked theory, and I won’t deliberately carry it out.”

“What did Mr. Godstone say?”

“That he believed in heaping up knowledge of what was good and beautiful, and putting the rest aside. If we did that, he said, the whole world might be swept clean.”

“He is an old idealist; but I always liked him. And he thought that you needn’t tell Kitty?”

"He said it would be cruel; that there could be no outcome of telling her, except the pain and disillusionment I dreaded; that confession sometimes became a fetish, a selfish thing, done to comfort oneself at a fearful cost to the one who listened, and that he thought in this case silence would be the better part." She stopped for a moment, while Lady Burfield stared at her. This was a new view of the situation, and she had not yet taken it in. "I often think that what Jack did didn't belong to him somehow," Mrs. Roberts went on, "any more than an outside scar belongs to one's soul."

"Suppose you told Harry and not Kitty?"

Mrs. Roberts shook her head. "I couldn't—he's too young, and somehow he is too charming, too simple, though, he's manly enough. It would be wicked to afflict him with that knowledge, and as for telling him only—I don't want him to have a secret from Kitty."

"And if it ever comes out?"

"I've thought of that, and I mean to tell Sir George. It's not as if it had happened yesterday; it's all those years ago—he couldn't let it make any difference."

"Of course he couldn't." There was a shade of doubt in her voice. "So many people go to prison nowadays"; she said it on purpose, "directors and rich people and people who have fads. Of course he may be old-fashioned and make a fuss."

"I know; I've thought of that too, but it isn't as if the scandal had been associated with the name we are known by."

"It was so sensible of you to change it."

"Jack said I was to do that—he thought of it."

"You only knew him at Santa Maria, too, out of the season; and you said there were no regular residents—no one at all was there who knew; there's nothing to connect you with the case?"

"No."

They were silent for a moment, Lady Burfield was evidently thinking hard; then she looked up and spoke with decision. "I can't see why you should even tell the father. I didn't tell my husband, and yet I married him only a little more than two years after it—he knows nothing."

"I've always been so glad you didn't—but it was not his affair at all, Aunt Robin."

"That's true." There was another silence before Lady Burfield said again, "I can't see why you should tell Sir George."

"I must; or I should feel so dishonourable."

"But according to your own showing, my dear, it isn't what you feel, but what is best for Kitty, that is the chief consideration."

Helen turned and looked at her. "I know, but I want to do the right thing, the straight one," she answered, with the little scare in her eyes that Kitty knew so well.

Lady Burfield considered for a moment. "After all, it's a very ugly story," she said. "He was so charming—and such a brilliant boy," a smile came to her face even at the recollection. "Every one knew him, believed in him, trusted him—somehow he was always in the midst of everything. If he had committed forgery it wouldn't have been so bad—many well-bred people have done that—it's quite a gentlemanlike crime and so easy, a name signed and it's over. I daresay some men

were hanged for it, when it was a capital offence, without realising they had done anything very bad."

"Jack didn't do any worse."

"My dear child he did—they called it embezzling; embezzling is a horrid word—common and vulgar—and then, of course, he made it worse still by running away."

"He lost his head—he was desperate."

"But he bolted with somebody else's wife, to put it plainly."

"No, he didn't," Helen answered quickly. The hunted look was on her face again, it went to Lady Burfield's heart. "The papers said he was joined by a lady who crossed by a later boat—she followed him."

"Anyway they were together. He was overtaken and tried, the case made a sensation because of the details, he was convicted, and died in prison."

"Oh, don't let's go over it, Aunt Robin."

"I want you to get the sound of it—to see that it's quite possible Sir George may wince."

"But it's such years and years ago now."

"It is one of the cases that will never be forgotten; the trial went on so long, for he wouldn't speak."

"He was afraid of other people being dragged in."

"Who were probably much more to blame than he was—so like Jack, always careless of himself," she said with a sigh. "I shall never understand how it all happened, when he had a wife and child—nor how he could look at any other woman when he had seen you."

Mrs. Roberts got up and walked across the room and leant against the side of the little writing-table, resting the back of her head against the book-shelf above it. "It's no good not having courage to face things," she said. "He liked me, of course; he was dear and affec-

tionate, but he wasn't in love with me—as men love women—though he married me. I didn't realise it till after he had gone; but in the years since I've learnt to think calmly and to understand it—he was infatuated with her, not with me, and he couldn't help it.”

“Who was she?”

“I don't know. He said it was better that I shouldn't.”

“She evidently belonged to the other side of his life.”

“The other side?”

“Yes, dear, the side that many men have and never turn towards their families,” she explained, for she saw that Helen, with her limited experience of the world, her idealism—had not Mr. Godstone helped to bring her up—wondered at her meaning. “It mayn't be a bad side or an unpleasant one—it's generally pleasant—but on a different plane, and they know that a parting of the ways will come some day.”

“He wanted to marry her—they were engaged.”

“Then he would have taken her away from her surroundings and put her in his—he didn't want always to belong to her set, and instinctively he avoided bringing the two together. That's why we none of us knew her. I've often wondered who she was.”

“I'm glad it never came out.”

“It was very clever of her to vanish as she did—of course the papers were managed. How did you know of his infatuation for her?”

“He told me about her at Santa Maria the night before he asked me to marry him.”

Lady Burfield looked up quickly. “He told you then?”

It may seem incredible that these two women who

were on affectionate terms had never fully talked things out; but it was so. Of the whole tragedy, save what the papers had told her, Lady Burfield had known very little. Jack was her nephew, but in her spinster days she had visited and travelled a good deal, and a young man does not give much account of himself to a maiden aunt of uncertain movements. She had known nothing of his first engagement and of the second she only heard just before the marriage. She wrote to the unknown wife and saw her for a moment when she passed through London on her way to Wales with the invalid father, and then not again till a message, long delayed, reached her from Jack, saying that Helen was near the prison at Lewes; and he begged her to go and see her. She went, to find a shrinking girl, with a child she seemed hardly to realise was hers, lying on a bed by an open window, crushed, hopeless, speechless. She had done what she could, but the girl's one desire after her husband had died was to get away from every one who could speak to her of what she had suffered—from the surroundings that seemed to be saturated with cruelty and pain—back to the mountains that had no knowledge of the awfulness that had overtaken her and crushed joy and love and belief out of her heart. Long ago, she had told Lady Burfield, she had gone with her father seeking specimens he valued to a little place in the Austrian Tyrol. There were mountains there too, but nothing else to remind of the joy that had come and so swiftly gone. She went there now with her child—sullenly, longingly, a dumb scared thing unconsciously asking Nature for the peace that no humanity had power to give her. Lady Burfield heard from her at long intervals. Nearly two years later she

met Wendover in London, and he told her of Helen, whom he had met at Hallstatt; but they never met again till she went to Cannero with Sir James three years ago. Then she saw that time had done its work—judging from Helen's silence she hoped it had brought forgetfulness; then it was, too, that she realised the strange magnetism of the woman she had only known as a hopeless girl. Thus some of the details of the tragedy were almost unknown to her. They seemed unbelievable now, as she looked at the beautiful woman facing her, at the room with all its evidences of refinement bathed in the afternoon light—a bygone nightmare that had no place in the tangible world. "What did he tell you?" she asked.

"He said he had been in love with some one else—madly, insanely—those were his words. He had known her first at Oxford; she had a cousin there called Norton."

"I remember once seeing him."

"He did something wrong and was sent down. He was mixed up with the Stock Exchange afterwards—with all sorts of things. He got hold of Jack, who could never believe ill of any one, and said he would make a fortune for him. Jack wanted money."

"I know, but what did he say about her? I mean before your marriage—at Santa Maria."

"He said—he had been carried away—that she was reckless and worldly, dependent on luxury and pleasure, but so compelling—no one could withstand her. I remember he laughed even at the remembrance of the hours he had spent with her, they were so happy. He said 'she was just God Almighty and I was her creature.' I thought it a blasphemous expression," Helen

went on with her strange little smile, "but I've understood it since, for doesn't God let his creatures do the strangest things—the best and the worst. One never knows when misery or crime is stalking us; it seems as if it may overtake any human being, just as an earthquake may come to these lovely places." She put her hand to her throat for a minute. "I have looked along the misty line of shore beside the Mediterranean sometimes, and thought that perhaps one summer night the upheaval would come, as ruin came to him—on an impulse, in a moment—he told me it did. It seems so cruel that there should be no power strong enough to prevent it."

"There is, dear Helen, there is."

"Oh, no, or things wouldn't happen as they do."

The voice went to Lady Burfield's heart. "Tell me more—if you can," she said, after a moment's pause.

"It was one of the strange infatuations that sometimes overtake men. She was engaged to him for a time, though he didn't tell his people; he knew they wouldn't like it. He meant to work them round gradually, he said; but he hadn't money enough to satisfy her and quite suddenly she married a rich man who had something to do with Indian gold mines. She said that he paid some debts for her."

"I daresay it was a story—Jack always believed people."

"He threw up everything when he heard of her marriage and went abroad."

"Oh, that was why—I never understood."

"After a time he came to Sestri Levante to see Mr. Godstone."

"And fell in love with you?"

"Only in theory, Aunt Robin. It's a strange thing to say, but all these years I've been thinking it over and see quite clearly it was only in theory. He used to call me his Madonna of all the Ages, because I was fair and knew nothing of the world—how should I, living as I did? He thought it all so simple and poetic—and the places were very beautiful. He fell in love with the situation and thought he did with me. One day we went over to Chiavari and walked about in the cathedral together, he and I alone, and I told him of the miracle that had happened there and brought salvation to a lost soul. He said it would be his salvation to marry me. That's why, I think, he did it—for his soul's sake in a way, and because he was charmed by the atmosphere of life as it was there. I didn't understand then, I was so unsophisticated; but all the time I was a girl who was going to be a woman and waiting to be loved as a human woman is loved—and that love he never gave me. If he had, I could have borne these years so much better, but another woman was more to him than I—perhaps he waits for her now." She shivered and turned away.

"I wonder if she cared very much for him?"

"If she had she wouldn't have thrown him over—she ran away to him, but deserted him when the crash came—if she had loved him enough she would have shared his prison. They didn't even know who she was. They sent for me."

"And you forgave him?"

Mrs. Roberts shook her head. "There was no occasion—he knew. There was never a moment when he was unforgiven."

"What did he say—can you bear to tell me?"

She put her hands over her face for a moment as if to bring back the scene, then looked up and said in a low voice, as if she were repeating words she heard still in her heart, "He said, 'Don't let the little kiddie know—promise—promise that you won't—that her father was a thief and a convict and died in a prison infirmary before he could even expiate his crime by beginning his sentence.'"

"Poor Jack"—the tears came to Lady Burfield's eyes—"to think it should have come to that."

"I would rather die than that Kitty should know."

"I understand it now—you poor thing."

"If only I had seen his mother again——"

"It broke her heart. It nearly broke mine—for she was my only sister and I was devoted to her. She was so unhappy at not being able to be with you, the only comfort she had was being able to provide for you and Kitty."

"It has done a great deal for us—for my father hadn't much to leave us."

There was a long pause. Then Lady Burfield looked up. "Mr. Godstone was right. If you are a wise woman, my dear Helen, you will shut the thing for ever out of your life. It was over and finished before you were two-and-twenty—before your girlhood ended—look upon it as a dream, a nightmare; love him for the good days you had at Santa Maria and in Wales, for I suppose you had some good ones there too?"

"Oh, yes, and he was an angel to my father."

"He was an angel to every one; and angels have fallen as well as men—but just as now he forgets all the tragedy of his life, forget it too. You have your child; she is going to be happy, and happiness may come to you—in many ways. Take my advice, dear;

I see it plainly, now that we have gone over it—say nothing to Sir George.”

“He ought to know; besides it would safeguard Kitty.”

“Wait till you see him, at any rate. Then decide. By being silent you may wipe it all out for ever—except in your own memory. I begin to think it would be cruel to speak of it to any human being.”

“You think that?” Mrs. Roberts was almost startled.

“Cruel, and even dishonourable,” Lady Burfield repeated firmly. She waited; there was a long silence broken only by the sweet cracked sound of the church bells; it was nearly five o'clock. “My dear, what are you going to do?” she asked at last.

“I don't know—I must think it over.” Then as if she could bear the tension no longer, she almost entreated, “Let us forget it for a little while, for you have come and those two dear things are together—they'll be here directly clamouring for their tea. Thank Heaven they have at any rate had three good days—it's something, Aunt Robin. If it can only go on——”

“It lies in your hands,” Lady Burfield answered.

And then Luigi came in with the tea apparatus, which has helped many a woman through a difficult hour. Mrs. Roberts felt that it gave her a respite now. With desperate resolution she put away all thoughts and considerations that had perplexed and distracted her, and looked up with a sigh of relief, and forced a smile to her lips. “Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.”

“There was a thinker who put it differently,” Lady Burfield said. Mrs. Roberts stopped with the spoon tilted over the little silver caddy, to listen. “He said,

'Let us take hands and help, for this day we are alive together.'

"And you are here," her listener said tenderly, and having attended to the tea went forward to be kissed.

"Any one could love her," Lady Burfield thought, just as Mrs. Roberts had thought it of Kitty. "I wonder if Francis Wendover is a fool, or whether she can't care for any one else," and then she said, "Do you know that Mr. Wendover is back?" It escaped her before she knew it.

"Yes, I wrote to him about Kitty."

"Oh," it was something to know that, Lady Burfield thought, and to cover up her previous untactful remark she went on with unnecessary vehemence. "And now, tell me if it's true that you are giving up the villa and going to stay with Miss Bateson in London?"

"Why, yes,"—Mrs. Roberts was surprised—"but how did you know?" She broke into a happy laugh when she heard.

Then up the garden path there came the sound that she had listened to first four days ago—it was like music to her—the sound of footsteps and happy voices. "Here they are," she said.

They entered laughing for joy. "Aunt Robin Redbreast," Kitty exclaimed, "we knew you were here. We met Signor Carones, and he told us he had seen you; it's too beautiful of you."

"Kitty, dear!" Lady Burfield held her close for a moment; then she turned to the young man beside her and realised his handsomeness, his many inches, and the expression on his face with pride and satisfaction, for was he not going to be her great-nephew? "My dear—Harry——"

"How do you do, Aunt Robin?" he said demurely.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER all, Miss Bateson went straight home from Basle. Now that she knew of Kitty's engagement she felt certain that, combined with the fact of the Signora Luchino's desire for the villa, it was only a matter of weeks before Mrs. Roberts and Kitty were in London, and she wanted to look at the house in Berkeley Square from the hostess' point of view. It was one of the smaller houses, furnished simply and in excellent taste; for Harry had been quite right in saying that she was rich, and Kitty in thinking that if it were so she cared little about it. There were times when she almost forgot it, and abroad she made no sign other than a pleasant ease regarding money that only seemed like the ease of a person with a sufficient income for her needs. Her luggage was always of an economic description, even shabby; any flaunting of affluence never occurred to her; she travelled second class, avoided fashionable places and large hotels, or if she went to them it was to see rather than to be seen. Money had come when her habits were formed; she only gradually realised that luxuries were within her reach; she cared nothing for finery or smart society; and had grown accustomed to the indifference of people to her only moderate attractions. She had probably known, since every woman has, sentimental longings and little vanities; but she had shaken them off, or time had quenched them, and her happiness did not depend on human beings. Her grandfather had

died when she was eight-and-twenty; till then the trammels of relationship, that gave her little compensating affection, had tied her down. After his funeral it was found that by a fluke he had made a fortune in the last years of his life and left it equally between his two grandchildren. The chief feeling it brought them was a keen sense of freedom. They could do as they liked; there would be no more snubs, or restrictions, or implied reproaches of the mother's English marriage and their father's improvidence. No more obligation on Darragh's part to do journeyman work when he wanted to think out things for himself; and for Elsie, as she was called, though she tried hard to grieve for him, and did to a moderate extent, there was no longer the testy, niggardly old man to look after, who never failed to let her know that the services she gave him in household matters could have been gained more cheaply from a stranger. There had been good hours, good days, there are compensations in most lives, but the irritations and drawbacks had outweighed them. They wanted to be mournful, and reproached themselves for their secretly rejoicing hearts; but the fact remained and bewildered them.

"What will you do?" she asked her brother.

"I shall go off West," he answered. "Don't you worry about me. I shan't be making signs, but some day I'll turn up. What will you do?"

"I'll go to Europe first, and think it over there; one thing I just long to do is to travel, yet I don't want to go out West—I want Europe."

And so they parted, with a little ache perhaps on her side, but she kept it down; without much regret on his—he was too eager for sentiment. Once on board

ship the knowledge that she could do absolutely as she pleased almost overwhelmed her. "Glad I'm not on dry ground," she thought; "believe I'd wear all my shoes out walking over it, just because I couldn't keep still." There was one determination she made, though unconsciously; she was alone and would remain so, and no one should be in a position to discuss her affairs, to criticise her, to give her advice. In the Bloomsbury boarding-house none of her fellow-boarders had the least idea that the lively little woman whose surface curiosity was never unfriendly, who would talk to them and know them up to a certain point and no further, was a rich woman who had lately come by her own. After a time they got on her nerves—those grave, lean, grubby-looking students—the sameness of their lives and interests, their limitations, their everlasting burrowing in books; the gloom of the London winter, too, the monotony of the boarding-house food, became unbearable. She thought of the New York sky, of the exhilarating air, of the throbbing pulse of humanity there, of the work that was done out in the open. "But I don't want to go back," she said to herself; "it's something else I want—some place to fit into—wonder where it is?" Just as Kitty did, and yet differently, she felt that her portion of life was not enough. It was no cry of vanity or greed, but an indefinite longing—probably every human being knows it at some time—to be identified with the mysteries and the working of the world. She thought of the voyage across the Atlantic, of the high winds that swept past, and the great waves that seemed to leap at her; she had felt as if they were full of knowledge. Suddenly it seemed—this was in the boarding-house—as if the memory of them had sug-

gested a solution of her perplexity—there was the old longing to travel; she had allowed it to lie dormant for a time, but half a dozen European countries were waiting to be discovered.

She turned her back on Bloomsbury, and lived the most wonderful time of her life wandering through beautiful lands, charmed and delighted, happy as a bird, talking with every one who would let her, as naturally as a sparrow chirps, and forgetting them the next minute; all but Mrs. Roberts and Kitty—they stayed in a quiet recess of her memory.

She went back to England, at the end of many months, but not to Bloomsbury—to an hotel in Dover Street; for she was growing more sophisticated and knowledgeable as to the power of money. She had learnt from people she met by the way the right places to go to; gathered hints of things that could be done; she was beginning to feel adventurous. She determined to take a house, and sat down to consider what manner of house she wanted. "It must have trees near it, and be in the midst of life. I want it to be the best life in London this time, and to see what comes of it." The fashionable agent to whom she went, misled by her appearance, made suggestions of Bayswater and Lancaster Gate. She shook her head. Then, passing it over as an impossibility, he mentioned the house in Berkeley Square. She pulled him up. "Well, now, I'd like to hear about that," she said. It was a surprise no less than a lesson to him to find that within a week she had bought a lease of it. Her wit, and an excellent upholsterer, helped to make it not only comfortable but charming, and to give it a simplicity that deprived it of all vulgarity. Through various small accidents she

made acquaintance, and occasionally gave luncheon and evening parties, building up her set on the introductions that are easily given to a woman who is obviously rich and lives alone. But though she was amused and a pleasant hostess, she made no friendships; she was lonely and dissatisfied. "I don't care one bit for the people who come here, eating and drinking and caring for nothing at all. I don't want to know them, and I won't; I'll shut it up and go away," she said to herself, before her first London season was over. "I'll go abroad again and think it out." Then she remembered Mrs. Roberts and Kitty; they seemed to be waiting, to beckon her. "I believe I want to see them," she said wonderingly. "Anyhow, I'll come back that way—it'll be a good thing to bring them home in my thoughts."

So she set forth once more, quite alone, as she always was, with only Bogey, the coloured servant, who had known her all her life and was always called by the name she had given him as a child to see her off: she had sent for him when she took her house. Again the sense of freedom, the comfort of never attracting attention, of doing as she pleased, of having no obligations of any sort, enchanted her. She wandered about the Continent, restless and amused, getting enthusiastic occasionally on various subjects—about Shelley at one time and Cavour at another—dropping them, and forgetting. All the time, in an undefined manner, she was steering for Cannero, and when she arrived there at last she liked it even better than before. "Something's right with the place," she thought, "and I'll come whenever I'm tired or sick of the world, and don't want to hear people talk or see them do silly things. Why, it's like a landing on the staircase up to Heaven, and I'm

glad to be on it, though I expect I'll want to go down after a bit."

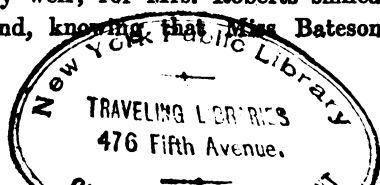
It was not until the second day that she went to the Villa Elena. It took courage to go at all, for she had only known its tenants slightly, she wondered if they would even remember her, or take her going amiss; for of course they had no idea of the impression they had made upon her. When she saw them she held her breath. For some reason she could not define, her heart reached out to them. They were not gushing—Mrs. Roberts was almost cold. "She's kind—but it's the kindness of moonlight," she said to herself. Kitty, who had grown up since her last visit, looked at her with soft, dark-lashed eyes that seemed to be troubled, and her manner was a little absent. "But, oh," Miss Bateson said to herself, "I felt as if I wanted to take her in my arms and kiss her. I don't know what it is about these people, but they are just fascinating." They stole more and more into her thoughts, till without knowing it, she had an affection for them that became, in a healthy, pleasant way, almost an infatuation. They never guessed it, neither did she herself, till the last few minutes, when Mrs. Roberts warmed to her as she saw the expression on her face—the capacity for love, the longing—just as one sees sometimes a wonderful picture one has passed many times, and only realises its beauty in the hurrying moment when it is no longer possible to stay and contemplate it. The little incident on the landing-stage before her departure put a crowning touch to Miss Bateson's feeling for them. She went on her way possessed of the idea that the one thing in life was to have them staying in her house. This was why, when she met Lady Burfield at Basle, in the couple

of minutes at her disposal, she hurried out the fact that they were coming, rather than, as most women would have done, the news of Kitty's engagement.

She gave a sigh of relief at the tranquillity of her home when she reached it. The mournful, faithful grin of Bogey was the solitary welcome that awaited her; but she looked at her house with fresh interest, and congratulated herself on possessing it. No one had ever slept in the spare rooms. She went to them and tried to make up her mind which should be allotted to Mrs. Roberts and which to Kitty. She thought of the friends who would possibly come to see them. Francis Wendover—she knew that he was one—and Mr. Saxton, and Sir James Burfield, whom, never having set eyes upon, she took to be learned and formidable. At this point she went into the library and stood contemplating the beautifully bound books. "It will take years to get them shabby," she said regretfully. "They will despise me and think I've never read a thing. I ought to have bought them at a second-hand place. I think I'll buy some old ones now and put between. I'd leave the windows open all night to let the London fog in on them—it would take off the gilt—only I'd feel so cruel; but something will have to be done."

From Paris she had written to Mrs. Roberts, telling her how much she rejoiced at Kitty's engagement to "that lovely young man" (Harry made a face when he heard it), and how she had met Lady Burfield and felt herself to be a real friend of the family, and they were to make haste and come to her as fast as possible. This was as near to a sentimental letter as she could get and answered very well; for Mrs. Roberts smiled when she read it, and, knowing that Miss Bateson

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couldn't be poor and so find visitors a burden, she felt that it would be a pleasant excitement to stay with the kind little woman. She wrote and told her that since Lady Burfield arrived it had been agreed that when they left the villa they would go to England and accept her hospitality, for a little while at any rate.

But this letter was still on its way when Miss Bateson walked home from ordering a batch of old books to leaven the newness of her library, and, letting herself in with a latchkey, sat down on a carved bench by some tapestry, and looked round the pleasantly furnished hall. She shook her head, and thought how queer it was that this should be her home—that everything in it was her own property. "Doesn't seem though as if I'm the right person to be here," she thought, "or to have it. It's lovely, but I feel like a stranger walking about the house—as if it didn't want to know me. Don't care if it belongs to me twice over, I don't feel to belong to it. Perhaps it will be better when they come."

There was a double knock. The hall was of an irregular shape. She drew back so as not to be seen when the door was opened. She put her finger to her lips when Bogey passed her on his way to open it, and shook her head.

"Is Miss Bateson at home?" she heard a man's voice say.

Gloomy and laconic, Bogey answered, "No."

"Is she in London?"

Bogey was a willing but doubtful liar, and answered, "I don't know."

"Why, I know that voice," Miss Bateson said to herself, and, remembering, darted forward.

"She's here," said Bogey, without turning a hair.

"Mr. Saxton!" she exclaimed. "Well, now, isn't this nice."

He was phlegmatic as usual. "I wasn't sure if I was right." He gave a furtive glance at the evidences of wealth.

"But you are—just as right as anything. I thought you were in Italy still; didn't think you were in London, anyway."

"I got here yesterday," he explained, and followed her into the morning-room on the ground floor. There was a log fire crackling and blazing, for the English spring was chilly. She indicated a chair, but he remained standing, evidently nervous, as if he felt he ought to apologise for coming. She seated herself on a couch, pulled some silk cushions to her back, and rested against them. "I declare it's too funny to see you here in London," she said, wondering what was the matter with his appearance. Something was wrong with his clothes, she thought; but they had always been a little heavy to the feminine eye. He wore a frock coat, a ponderous necktie; he had carried in his tall hat and put it down beside him.

"I came to ask if you would care to go to the Royal Institution to-night," he explained. "Dickson, who was to have talked, has been taken suddenly ill, so they've got Francis Wendover to take the Friday night—it seems he made some discoveries he can speak about that won't interfere with his paper to the Geographical."

She rose to her feet. "I'd just love it," she exclaimed. "Do you mean you can get me in? I've been wondering what to do, for I don't know any of

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the members, and didn't see any way of getting there. I went this morning to inquire if anything could be done, and the old man in the hall, with brass buttons on his coat, seemed to think I was foolish—perhaps he was right." She said the last words with the occasional mournful note he remembered so well at Cannero; it attracted him more than anything else in her.

"It will probably be very full. We ought to get there rather early."

"I'll go and get ready now, if you like—this very minute."

"It doesn't begin till nine o'clock," he said, pleased with her eagerness. Then slowly and doubtfully he added, "We might have had some dinner at—at Verreys"—Mr. Saxton was evidently unacquainted with the newer places, and cast about in his mind even to find an old one—"but I have to dine with a man at the Royal Societies Club."

"Well, you might come here—the man too?"

He shook his head.

"Anyhow, you must come some other night," she said.

He considered for a moment before he answered, "That will be very pleasant. Who lives here?" he asked, with an air of wonderment.

"Why, I do, of course."

"By yourself?"

"By myself. That's why I wanted Mrs. Roberts and Kitty—they're coming," she added triumphantly.

"I didn't know you were rich." He looked at her with mild surprise.

"I've half grandfather's money. Darragh—that's my brother—has the other half. I don't let people

know, when I go away. They expect you to do things that worry."

"That's true," he said, as if it were a profound discovery. Then after another moment of deliberation he asked, "Have you heard from Cannero yet?"

"Why, no; but"—she hated to give him pain—"I expect you know about them, don't you?"

He mistook the reason of her hesitation. "About the father?"

"What about him?" she asked quickly. "I never heard anything."

"I didn't know him," he answered calmly; but the colour came to his face, up to the top of his head and showed through his scanty hair. "He died a long time ago. I heard of him the other day—that's all."

"Did you go to Sestri Levante to see that old friend you spoke about?"

"He wasn't there—they thought he was at Levanto. I went there too and missed him again, but I saw some curious frescoes at the Hôtel Nazionale, and an old woman lived there who had a portrait of Mrs. Roberts when she was a girl. I saw it hanging up."

"Well, now, wasn't that curious? I suppose she used to live there?"

"Yes, I suppose she did"—he stopped as if he regretted mentioning it—"before she was married," he added, and went on quickly, "I saw Viareggio and Spezia, so I know all about Shelley now." He smiled, to show that the remark was humorous.

"Think of your caring so much as all that!"

"I didn't care at all, but I wanted to get it over. Viareggio is a wretched place, but I saw the Carrara

mountains, so I forgive you. All the same I shall be glad to see Somersetshire again."

"Believe you think it's equal to Italy."

"I do," he answered with conviction.

She laughed and showed her even white teeth. "Isn't that nice of you? I do like people who care for their own—whatever it is. I dare say it's as beautiful as you think," she added generously; "but every place is if you come to think of it, except where builders and people have spoilt it—that's what Mrs. Roberts thinks. I never knew any one who had so much love for the world. Somehow it brimmed over her heart and got into mine too. I never thought about it till I knew her."

He looked at her a little bewildered; this sort of talk was not much in his way. "You've not told me about Kitty?" he said.

"Well, you remember that good-looking young man who came the last morning you were there?"

"Yes?" He looked up and waited.

"It seems he came to see Kitty, and—well—they're engaged."

There was a moment's silence before Mr. Saxton asked in a detached manner, "Who is he?"

"He's called Harry Kerriston."

"I wonder if he's the son of Sir George Kerriston—it would be a good thing for her." He considered again for a moment before he added: "I'm sorry for the mother; I don't know what she'll do. He's a good-looking youth; I hope he'll be good to her." He stopped and considered again. Then abruptly, as if roused from a reverie, he got up. "I wonder if Kerriston—the father, I mean—will like it?" he said.

"Why shouldn't he? You are fond of her, aren't you?"

"Yes, poor little thing, I am very fond of her. But I heard about him the other day; he has only this one son, and expects him to do a good deal. He means him to go into Parliament in a year or two, and has been worrying around to get him a private secretaryship meanwhile. Did you say that Mrs. Roberts had decided to come to England?"

Then she told him how the Signora Luchino wanted the villa again in six weeks' time, and of her own successful interview with Mrs. Roberts. "And now that Kitty is engaged," she said, "I shouldn't wonder if they come quite soon; they'll want to buy clothes if she is going to be married, and she'll have to go round and see his relations."

"We must do what we can for them; I don't think they have many friends of their own."

She noticed that his manner in speaking of them had altered. It was grave, almost depressed. "Wonder what it means?" she thought when he had gone. "Perhaps he's found out that they are poor. Doesn't matter if they are; I'll give her things."

She walked to the Royal Institution with a cloak over her evening dress and a lace scarf on her head, for her still occasionally frugal soul would not allow her to take a cab for the few minutes' walk to Albemarle Street. Besides, it was dark, so no one could see her. The air was soft, she felt light of foot and heart, and a curious satisfaction came over her when she saw the long string of carriages setting down listeners for Francis Wendover. "It's in my blood," she thought, "the worker's blood. I like to see them

flocking to hear a man who has done more than they have. He's done what we're doing in my country—seeking, working. We are eager. We haven't deep roots yet, but we are spreading over the earth, like ivy over the oak trees, and we'll be like it, strong and green, when they are dead and falling."

Mr. Saxton was watching for her in the entrance hall. They went upstairs and found places far back under the gallery. They were early, but the small dreary-looking theatre was already nearly full. A few moments later it was crammed. As the white-faced clock pointed to nine a little procession walked in from behind the lecturer's place. The "bald old gentlemen," as Miss Bateson called them in her clear low whisper, were Presidents or distinguished Fellows of learned Societies; the old man with high shoulders who took the chair was a savant and looked apologetic for being also a duke. They seated themselves in the front row of chairs, all but Francis Wendover, who was left standing at the table. He was a tall man, well knit, and "just as thin as a broom-stick," Miss Bateson said to herself. A sunburnt, weather-beaten face with deep lines on it—lines that, together with the mouth, only half hidden by the long, brown moustache, suggested endurance and good humour; kind, deep-set eyes that, overhung by a broad, furrowed brow, looked like slits sometimes, but they were very blue, and laughter loitered in them. The eyebrows threatened to be shaggy when he was older, and his hair, darker than the moustache, was thick and strong. He looked about forty-four, and like a man who had wrestled with hardships, enjoyed them, and come out of them quietly and triumphantly, though not without

anxiety. His voice, when he began to speak, was low and deep, and carried extraordinarily well. There were moments when, telling of difficulties in the way—he did it modestly enough—it degenerated into a growl of amusement that delighted his hearers. Altogether it was a personality and a voice that commanded attention and liking.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Francis Wendover had finished, a privileged few went up to the rooms, occupied in old days by Dr. Tyndall, where, as he used to do in the lecture season, his successor sometimes gathered in a small distinguished company after ten on Friday nights. The rest took themselves sedately away—a Royal Institution audience is always sedate. At the bottom of the staircase Miss Bateson discovered that she had lost the lace she wanted to tie round her head for the short walk home.

"What have you done with it?" Mr. Saxton asked wearily; he had been preoccupied all the evening.

"I expect I left it on the green baize rail at my back," she said. "I do think a woman who forgets things is a nuisance."

He gave her a wintry smile. "Wait here, and I'll look for it," he said, and went slowly up to the theatre again.

She made her way through the dispersing crowd towards the fireplace in the hall. Near it, standing at a desk, watching the people descend, was the old man, evidently a servant of the Institution, who had told her with pained surprise that morning that it was not possible to gain admission to the evening discourses by payment at the doors. He had a letter in his hand, and waited till a somewhat preoccupied-looking elderly man came down.

"Sir George Kerriston?" he asked, going up to him.

Miss Bateson cocked her head and listened. The

energy that had flagged in Mr. Saxton's company came rushing back.

"That is my name." The manner was a little testy.

"A messenger brought this just now, and said it was to be delivered to you immediately, Sir George."

"A messenger?" He seemed taken aback, and went up to the fireplace, within a yard of Miss Bateson, to read the letter. Then a smile came over his face; he put it into his pocket with an air of satisfaction.

Almost before she was aware of it she had gone a step forward. "Well, if you are Sir George Kerriston," she said, "I should like to speak to you." He started and turned towards her. In a minute, with the quickness that was natural to her, she had taken an impression of him. He was a curiously alert man, of not much over fifty, though at first sight he looked older; fairly tall, thin, and high-bred looking. His features were clear-cut, his eyes small and piercing: they could be cold and angry—she felt it. The fair moustache that Sir James Burfield remembered had become grey, and was neatly trimmed. His throat, which showed a good deal, was brown and wrinkled; he had a trick of pulling it up above his collar, and turning his head either way, as if for comfort. He struck her as being obstinate and quick-tempered, but kindly and extremely conscientious. His voice was clear and cultured; he spoke rapidly and with conviction, even on trifling matters. For a moment Miss Bateson quailed. He seemed to look her through. His voice was courteous, but demanded an explanation of her presumption in speaking to him. She felt that it would take courage to stand her ground, but she was not one to be easily daunted.

"Certainly," he said. "Have I the pleasure——"

She cut him short with a smile that made him look at her with interest. "Why, no, you haven't; but I saw your son at Cannero last week, and when I heard your name just now, before I knew what I was doing I spoke to you——"

His face lighted up. "You met my son?"

"I did," she beamed; "and I know the lovely girl he is engaged to——"

"This is very interesting. May I ask who the lady I am speaking to is?"

"Why, yes, but it won't tell you much. I am an American woman; at least I think I'm American—I'm not quite sure," at which he bowed slightly and smiled, for when Miss Bateson was at all excited or agitated it was impossible to mistake her accent. "I'm called Miss Bateson—Elsie Bateson. I say Miss so that you may know I'm not Missis—it saves mistakes. I live over here; but I have just come from Cannero, where I have been seeing Mrs. Roberts and Kitty every day for weeks."

The terseness and completeness of her explanation pleased him. "I am delighted to meet you. I should have liked a talk with you if it had been possible," he said. The brusque manner had disappeared. Obviously there was charm about the old man, as she called him to herself, though his years hardly entitled him to the description. It was the attenuated throat that did it.

"Well, but—— Oh, here's someone else who knows Mrs. Roberts quite well," as Mr. Saxton appeared. A look and a nod shewed that the two men knew each

other, by sight at any rate. "This is Sir George Ker-riston," she explained, as she took the lace, and turned to him again. "Mr. Saxton has known Mrs. Roberts and Kitty much longer than I have. He was just leaving Cannero when your son arrived—we were having breakfast together." Sir George looked at her again, but it was impossible to make any mistake about Miss Bateson. "We were staying at the same hotel," she added with amusement that he saw and answered with a little nod. "Mr. Saxton only caught a glimpse of him, for he had to run and catch his boat; but Kitty brought him down to the landing-stage to say good-bye to me when I started a few hours later, and told me what had happened. I thought him the most attractive young man I had even seen in my life," she added with fervour.

An inclination of the head acknowledged the compliment. "He's a very good boy. I have not seen the young lady yet. In fact I only knew of the engagement an hour or two before I came here—" he hesitated a moment—"it took me by surprise."

"Why!—you only knew it an hour ago—didn't he write off at once—didn't you know it was coming!"

"Of course he wrote. But I had gone suddenly to the far end of Scotland—a relation was supposed to be dangerously ill—the letter was forwarded, but arrived after I had started on my way back. It reached me this evening, on its return."

"And you have never seen Kitty?"

"No, you have the advantage of me as yet." His manner suggested that either the admission or the engagement did not please him.

"Well, Mr. Saxton I know is going to see me home, and if you will come with us, we can tell you a great deal about her."

"I'm afraid I can only go as far as your door," Mr. Saxton said evasively.

Sir George, bewildered at her rapidity—and not altogether pleased at the ready invitation—answered quickly, "I am sorry; but I have an engagement at eleven o'clock or a little later."

It struck her that he didn't look like a man likely to have an engagement at so late an hour. Perhaps he divined it, for he explained, "I dined with an old friend this evening, who was taking his daughter and some others to the theatre. I didn't go with them, for I wanted to hear Wendover——"

"Mr. Wendover has known Mrs. Roberts and Kitty too—for years; much longer than we have," Miss Bateson put in eagerly.

"Indeed." He heard it with obvious satisfaction.

"I'd just love to tell you about her," she said in the plaintive voice that always won people over; it had an effect on him.

"I promised Detner to go back; but he has sent me a note here," he said, with an evident desire to give her a valid excuse for his refusal, "to say that his young people insist on being taken to the Carlton for supper; he asks me to join them."

"Well, but he won't get there after a theatre performance till a quarter past eleven, you may be sure." She looked at the clock on the stairs. "You have just one hour; I only live round the corner in Berkeley Square."

There was a breezy innocence in her voice; the lo-

cality of her dwelling-place commended itself, and a desire to see what would be the outcome of a talk with this cool and pleasant American showed itself in his manner. "I travelled all last night," he said with a smile, "and I think an hour's rest at the club before showing my old mug at such a frivolous place as the Carlton would be as well——" he used the slang expression as if it were a condescension.

"But wouldn't you rather hear about your son than get all the rest in the world?" She was evidently surprised.

"Yes, I would," Sir George answered with decision, as if in a moment he had considered the question. "I own to you that his engagement is the most interesting subject in the world to me just now." He made a movement towards the door.

"We can't go without you," she said to Mr. Saxton, who was hanging back. "You'll both be away before eleven," she added. "I'll be tired too by then." She gave him a look that seemed to say, "Come, it will be good for Kitty." Perhaps he understood it, for he joined them without another word.

"I was never carried off so quickly in my life," Sir George said. "Is your carriage here?"

"I haven't one," she answered triumphantly. "I always walk when I can." She gathered up her modest train, pulled her cloak round her—it was black with threads of gold in it, Eastern perhaps, and soft; it clung to her and showed the outline of her slender shoulders—tied the lace about her head, and stepped out into Albemarle Street.

"Where have we met before?" Sir George turned politely to Mr. Saxton, "somewhere, I know."

"I have been wondering," he answered slowly. "Was it on Cloutsham Ball last August?"

"Of course, now I remember, and you were at Selworthy the next day with two ladies, looking over the church."

"Why! what in the name of wonder is Cloutsham Ball?" Miss Bateson asked as they crossed Grafton Street and went down Hay Hill.

"It's a high field near Minehead, in Somersetshire, where the first meet of the staghounds is held in August," Sir George explained. "There is a farmhouse next it, where we generally wait till the tufters have done their business." It was all Greek to Miss Bateson, and she was too intent on Kitty's romance to listen very attentively.

"I remember now," Mr. Saxton said. "You were with the Detners."

"Quite right," the other answered. "And no doubt you remember going to Selworthy." He turned to Miss Bateson and explained again. "There is a picturesque church looking over Exmoor, and some cottages with magnificent walnut trees in the large garden belonging to them. The contented old women who live in the cottages are allowed to make tea for visitors."

"Well," Miss Bateson said, looking up at Mr. Saxton, "Mrs. Roberts and Kitty and I will see it all when we come and stay with you."

"Is that arranged?" Sir George asked, and again some satisfaction made itself felt, for he remembered that Lord Detner, who had gone up to Mr. Saxton with much cordiality, told him afterwards that he was a landowner who had been asked to stand for one of

the divisions of the county, but being a shy man, had refused. He was beginning to feel that what with Wendover and Mr. Saxton, he was groping his way along, to find that Kitty belonged to a sufficiently important set—and his good humour increased as they stopped at Miss Bateson's well-painted, brass-knockered door. She opened it with a latch-key. "The independence of these single women," he thought with a shade of amusement. Bogey had evidently been waiting in the hall; Sir George felt that he gave a right note to the adventure, since he obviously came from a world where the ways were not English, and accounted in a measure for any vagaries of his mistress.

"We'll come here," she said, and led the way into the dining-room. He felt instantly its atmosphere of comfort and affluence. A high dado of oak panelling to within five feet of the ceiling, then a Morris paper—the trellis pattern—a few engravings, too black to be made out in the dim light and at a distance; an effect of space, of old furniture, blue china, and a little brass; a lamp hanging low, crimson-shaded, over the table, which was small, and had on it a modest but daintily arranged little supper of sandwiches, cake, fruit, and a small cut-glass jug of lemonade. A wood fire smouldered on the curious dogs in the fireplace.

Bogey followed them in, switched on some more light to the shaded electric candles in the brass sconces on the wall, hesitated for a moment, put a bottle of white wine from the sideboard on the table, looked mournfully round, and vanished.

Miss Bateson, throwing aside her lace and cloak, seated herself at the head of the table; her thin black

evening-dress, simple enough for a school teacher, was not very low, her only ornament an old-fashioned necklace of seed pearls; her manner was absolutely without self-consciousness or affectation. It struck Sir George that if this was the unspoilt American, she was more attractive and looked better-bred than many Englishwomen who gave themselves airs of fashion and exclusiveness. Instinctively he liked and trusted her, and gave himself up to the pleasantness of the hour.

"Bogey didn't think I was going to have a supper-party," she remarked: it was the only apology she made for the rather scanty repast.

"I am going on to one, so you mustn't count me," Sir George said when they were seated. He looked across, almost with surprise, at Mr. Saxton, who, in spite of his advances, remained silent and heavy. "A dull dog," he thought, just as Sir James Burfield had done. "Your family has retired early?" he inquired of his hostess, courteously, and almost evidently afraid of being thought impertinent.

"Why, no,"—she was rather amused—"it hasn't; for I haven't any family at all, unless you count a brother thousands of miles away."

"And you live here alone?"

"Yes—I do—o." The words were long drawn out, and hardly prepared him for the sigh of satisfaction with which she added, "I think it's just beautiful."

"Beautiful?"

"Oh, yes. There isn't any one I need ask if I may go here or there, or do this or that——"

"Bless me!" He was surprised. "You like it?"

She looked at Mr. Saxton, and pushed the little dish of sandwiches towards him. "This is like our talk

the last morning at Cannero," she said, and turned to Sir George again. "It's such a good thing that women have learnt to stand alone. Men will have to do more and more if they want to keep ahead of us—if they want to prove they are stronger than we are—which is what we want them to be—don't we just love heroes?" She looked up at him appealingly, "Why, we do, and they've been forgetting it a good deal."

"You are quite right." He was surprised again. "You are on the edge of a most interesting subject, one that I should like to discuss further—you have evidently thought about it as I have; but there's no time now——"

"And I am longing to ask how in the name of wonder you could resist going off to Cannero the moment you read the letter. Why, I should have taken a cab to the station right away and gone by the night-mail."

"I don't think it even occurred to me," he answered, amused at her eagerness—"or that I am likely to go."

She turned to Mr. Saxton again. "He'll love Kitty, won't he?"

Mr. Saxton reflected an instant. "I think so." he said slowly.

"You've known her a long time?" Sir George inquired.

"Yes—since she was fifteen"

"And her family?"

"Her mother is a very beautiful woman."

"Who was she?"

Mr. Saxton hesitated before he answered. "Her father was a parson—so I heard." He said nothing concerning the portrait of which he had spoken in the

afternoon. As if to avoid further questions, he added, "I met them at Cannero soon after they went there."

"And where did you meet them?" Sir George asked Miss Bateson.

"Why, at Cannero, too."

He was silent for a moment; he seemed to be reflecting that, after all, they were only hotel acquaintances, and had little information to give him.

Mr. Saxton perhaps thought this was in his mind, for he remarked, "The Burfields—Sir James Burfield is the doctor—are their relations—I met them first when they were there."

"Of course." Sir George nodded with satisfaction. "I had forgotten for the moment that I know him. He did me a great deal of good some years ago. He married rather late in life a charming woman. I remember that they were good enough to ask me to dine with them before I went back to India for the last time." His memory was evidently better than Lady Burfield's.

"She is at Cannero now," Miss Bateson broke in. "I met her at Basle, just by chance; she was on her way to the train. I had never seen her before, but——"

"You spoke to her as you kindly did to me, eh?" Sir George said with a smile; but his eyes were watching her keenly, and she felt rather than knew that somehow there was a battle to fight, that this father was a man who meant to see things through; but what things she meant she would not have been able to define. "I did—for Mrs. Roberts and Kitty are coming to stay with me soon, so I thought I might. It makes me happy every minute to think of their being

here—why, I could tell it to people at the street corner—so when I found Kitty's aunt was before me it wasn't possible to keep silent." He smiled again; he seldom laughed. "I expect he feels himself too important to do that very often," she thought. "I believe he's just one of these old English aristocrats and can't forget it. The way they take themselves is just wonderful."

As a matter of fact, he had no thought at all of himself. He was entirely engrossed in his son, and concerning his son's future he had very strong views indeed. He looked at Miss Bateson again; her genuine little face gave him pleasure, her two rows of little white teeth were charming. And then she was American. It was pleasant to him to know that the girl his boy was going to marry had this nice woman for a friend; perhaps too, quite unconsciously, he was glad that this most excellent roof and these well-off surroundings were at the disposal of the mother and daughter who had become of so much interest to him. Suddenly he turned to Mr. Saxton. "Who was the father?" he asked, and then, as if he felt it to be a lack of good taste to ask so intimate a question of a comparative stranger, he added apologetically, "This engagement has been sprung upon me. Till a few hours ago Mrs. and Miss Roberts were nothing more than a pleasant excuse to go to the Italian lakes. I knew there was an attractive young lady, but there are so many of them—and it never occurred to me that there was anything serious, though, as Harry knows, I should like him to marry fairly soon." He waited a moment and went back to his question—"Did you know Mr. Roberts?"

"No. I never met him," came the slow answer. "I believe he died many years ago."

Again Miss Bateson remembered the talk of the afternoon. "It's your turn now, Sir George, to tell us about your boy," she said. "He is very handsome, and has a lovely speaking voice, but I want to know just everything about him."

"What shall I tell you?" he asked, gratified by the inquiry.

"Well, what is he going to do? I mean, is he a soldier or sailor or a lawyer?"

"He'll take an interest in politics, I hope, and help to govern his country by-and-by. I'm told by those who knew him at Oxford that he is a good speaker, and I am glad to hear an extremely modest one. I dislike the cocksure young men of the present day; they usually develop in unpleasant or dangerous directions." He said it carefully—it was impressive. "Harry is a boy who thinks, and contemplates what he thinks before he speaks or puts it into action. It is on his account that I am anxious to see Lord Detner again to-night. I didn't get any talk with him at dinner." Miss Bateson remembered that Mr. Saxton had told her that Sir George was worrying round for a private-secretaryship. Lord Detner was, of course, a Cabinet Minister: going to the Carlton was, perhaps, not so frivolous a jaunt as had appeared on the face of it. "My boy is everything to me," he added; "the only thing I have left." His voice came from his heart and went to Miss Bateson's.

"You'll be glad when you see Kitty," she said; he heard the feeling in her voice too. "You must be real anxious he should marry the right girl."

"It would be the greatest misfortune that could overtake me if he married the wrong one," he answered. "But that is not likely." He looked at his watch. "I must go in a moment. I can't tell you how much satisfaction it has given me to meet you and Mr. Saxton. I shall tell Harry so when I write."

"But haven't you written yet, or telegraphed?"

"No," Sir George said calmly; "I felt that I should like to think his letter over for a few hours. Nothing was to be gained by writing immediately. I'm glad I didn't do so before knowing that Mrs. Roberts and Kitty possessed so excellent a friend as yourself. You have made me look forward with great pleasure to seeing them."

She turned upon him quickly. "Sir George," she said, "I don't want you to think me a gushing woman; I don't believe I am one. I've been going about a long time now, and seen too much to be that; but I love Mrs. Roberts and Kitty." The accent that only truth gives was in her voice, and he heard it. "They seem to me just as absolutely pure and sweet and lovely as God meant human beings to be when He made the world for them, and forgot perhaps that a serpent might come round doing mischief."

He looked at her gratefully. "I shall tell them of our meeting when I write," he answered.

"But aren't you going out to see them?"

"I hadn't thought of it. I have to be in London to-morrow week for a very important committee, which I should on no account like to miss."

"But isn't the girl your son's going to marry more important than any committee anywhere on earth?" she asked with wide open eyes.

"Certainly. I shall see her immediately she comes to England."

"But you don't know what she's like, except from Mr. Saxton and me."

"And the boy himself. He has spoken of her frequently during the last year, though I didn't attach enough importance to it—and his letter is very explicit."

His voice was courteous, but showed that he was prepared to resent any questioning of his doings.

"Well, when a boy's in love his judgment isn't to be trusted. She may be a black woman"—at which he laughed—"or ugly, or silly, in spite of what we have said, or a dozen things. You say his happiness—his engagement—is the most important thing in the world to you, and yet you don't go just because you have a committee—and if you did, they'd remember it all their lives; it would show you cared. Men are queer—just queer; they never put enough value on things inside their homes, or things that don't mean money. For getting into Parliament or attending committees they'll wear themselves out—put everything aside. Kitty is your son's future, the most important thing in his life, and you don't know anything about her yet except what we've told you." It was only her obvious lack of intention to give offence and her voice that saved the situation; even so, Sir George looked at her with utter astonishment.

"My dear lady," he said severely, "I can trust my son; his views and mine regarding the conduct of life are the same. If Miss Roberts were any of the strange things you suggest he would not have asked

her to marry him—and if he had, and did marry her, I should never forgive him, and he knows it. One has duties in life as well as affections.” He stopped for an instant. “It has taken me by surprise, I own—if there were time to go and get back by next Friday I should be inclined to do it,” he added, thinking how strange it was to be discussing his family affairs with two people who an hour ago were strangers to him.

“But you can,” she answered. “You could start to-morrow afternoon and get there on Sunday evening. Or to-morrow night, by the Flushing route,”—he smiled at her details—“get to Lucerne, and sleep there on Sunday night, so as to be fresh in the morning when you would go over the St. Gotthard and be there—at Cannero—by tea-time on Monday.”

He was bewildered. “Dear me, you ought to have been a courier.”

“I told Miss Bateson once that she would get through the world twice over at the rate she goes,” Mr. Saxton explained.

“Well, I’d like it. Mrs. Roberts loves the world, and she’s taught me to love it, and I hope I’ll go over every inch of it before I die. I’d like to be a courier, Sir George,” she laughed. “You’d better take me on. It’s wonderful how many pleasures you lose by not being poor—that’s one, you see.”

“People are generally ready to forfeit them for the price you evidently pay.”

“I know, and I expected I’d be happy for ever when I found myself with grandfather’s money and able to do what I liked. It’s just splendid, I know;

but I often think how many treats I miss by being able to pay for them six times over every day if I like."

"You are a very remarkable woman," he answered with conviction.

Mr. Saxton, who was not so unobservant as he was taken to be, thought there was a shade of insolence, even of patronage, in the words and the manner. Perhaps it accounted for the half-bored tone in which he said, "It's time we went—eleven o'clock."

CHAPTER X

They left the house together. Bogey helped them into their coats, and shut the door softly as if he had let out a funeral.

"Are you going my way?" Sir George asked.

"Well, yes, as far as Piccadilly," Mr. Saxton admitted reluctantly. They crossed the square in silence; for some reason not to be explained they paralysed each other.

Sir George tried to shake it off. "I have had a very pleasant experience," he said.

"Yes?"

"The American women are singularly fresh. Till they are spoilt by money—this little lady, I understand, has only recently acquired it—or by the follies of our older civilisation, they strike one as being what nature intended them to be. Perhaps it is that they are nearer the earth, and the simpler life; they have not had time to run to seed." The words were measured out as if they were a lesson that had been learnt, and remembered with satisfaction.

"Yes," Mr. Saxton said again wondering whether Sir George mistook himself for a thinker. He did not believe in a country gentleman, with ambitious views for his son, having any power of intellectual digestion for the modern trends of thought. "They are amusing," he added, as if he felt it incumbent on him to say something more.

"More than amusing." The tone suggested that the reply had been inadequate. They walked on to the corner of Berkeley Street. Sir George made another effort to break through the heaviness that seemed to oppress his companion. "I have been extremely glad to meet you and your friend," he said. "I need hardly say that all you told me was not only interesting but extremely important to me." He paused for a moment, but there was no answer. "Miss Bateson was very enthusiastic about Miss Roberts. I gathered that you were also one of her admirers?" An untactful speech, prompted by a very real anxiety, which he tried hard to conceal, as to the state of things at Cannero, and his desire to learn all that was possible concerning Kitty from some other source than his son.

"I am," Mr. Saxton said slowly, and waited till they had passed the lamp at the Bath Club. Then the colour mounted to his face and head, as it had done in the little drawing-room at Cannero; but now the darkness concealed it while he said deliberately, "I asked her to marry me."

"Eh—what?" Sir George was taken by surprise. He tried to stare at Mr. Saxton to see what he was really like—this silent man who had asked a girl of eighteen to marry him—but the light was merciful, and only showed dimly the rather massive, slow-moving figure and a shadowed clean-shaven face.

Along the narrow way of Lansdowne Passage there came the quick tramp of footsteps—evidently a youth, who was whistling a popular air that seemed incongruous in that neighbourhood.

"She must be a most fascinating young lady," Sir George said, pulling himself together. His diction

when he was on guard was a little formal and old-fashioned.

"She is."

"And she refused you?"

"Yes." Mr. Saxton reflected for a moment. "She was quite right. I was too old. The boy will suit her better." He pulled up at the corner of Piccadilly. "Well, good-night," he said in a different tone; it was almost cheery.

Sir George held out his hand, he was almost cordial. "Good-night—I am exceedingly obliged to you." He seemed to be wondering what else to say, and not quite sure that he was awake. He added a practical question, as if to test himself. "Do you live in London, Mr. Saxton?"

"No; I am staying for a day or two at the Royal Society's Club—that's all."

"I hope we shall meet again."

"Perhaps—when they are in Berkeley Square. I shall come up to see them." The response was not very eager; he allowed his limp hand to be shaken, turned away, crossed the road, and disappeared.

Sir George went on to the Carlton, blinking his eyes with surprise. It had been a night of sensations; as he entered a section of the pivot-hung door and the faint sound of the band in the Palm Court reached him, he felt as if they were not over even yet. The supper-room was full. He stood looking at it for a moment. The flowers and the soft lights, the clatter of knives and forks, many voices, beautifully dressed women, the sparkle of jewels, and suggestion of wealth and squandering—the whole thing bewildered him after the quiet dining-room in Berkeley Square and the company

of Mr. Saxton. He looked round; the faces were strange—he felt himself to be apart from them all. Someone came forward; he asked for Lord Detner's table, and was taken to a round one almost in the centre line of the room. A place had been kept for him beside the daughter of his host. He took it, and resolutely concentrated his thoughts on the party he had joined.

"We were afraid the note had missed you, for we knew the Institution was over at ten," Ida Detner said. Her father, only recently made a peer, had not been afraid of giving his surname to a new title.

Sir George made his apology and looked round at the group. They were eight altogether; the women were young, well-dressed, and well-bred looking; but the little American woman, he thought, was more attractive than any of them. She had a mind of her own, and was fresh and wholesome. These people had no real individuality. The strain and hurry of London life, the everlasting round of amusements, were obliterating clear outlooks and strong characters—at any rate in the majority of the class to which he belonged. He turned to his neighbour on the other side: "Well, Lady Vining," he said, "tell me about the play."

"It was awfully funny," she answered, and nodded and laughed at a noisy party a little way off.

"Let me see, what was it?"

"'Mrs. Silcott's Divorce.'"

"Ah, as you say it suggests something awfully funny."

"It was a silly piece; I don't know why we chose

it," Lord Detner said, noticing the cynicism in Sir George's voice.

"Cecil told us of it," Ida explained.

"Well, I didn't think much of it," Arthur Foster, a soldier who had just got his company, remarked. "I can't think why they don't make plays about people one wouldn't be ashamed to see inside one's own house."

"They'd be very dull," Lady Vining laughed, and the others joined in. They thought her so chic: it was a sign of it that she usually went about without her husband though they had only been married two years.

"I should have liked to kick that man to-night," Captain Foster said, referring to the hero of the play.

"But you would have loved the woman."

"Don't think so," he answered firmly.

Sir George looked at him approvingly. He liked gunners; they generally had a decent outlook.

"I never understand the perpetual attraction of playing with the Seventh Commandment, nor of trivial flirtation. Yet they are the two subjects that hold the stage most successfully," Lord Detner remarked.

"I rather like serious plays myself; some of the Stage Society's, you know." The speaker was a solemn-looking young man.

"Oh, but they are not improper any more," Lady Vining said. "Only about the middle-class or Socialism or something of that sort."

"Dear me, I didn't know that, it's no good opening doors unless people will enter them; but something might be done." Lord Detner's programme was al-

ways conciliation: it had served him well. "Kerrist-ton, you haven't told us about Wendover. Was he good?"

"Excellent."

"I should so like to see him," Lady Ida said. "He is very handsome, isn't he?"

"I don't know," Sir George answered. "I didn't consider him from that point of view; but you are sure to meet him, and can settle that great question for yourself." He looked at her critically. She was four-and-twenty, a little sallow and thin, with crinkly dark hair and small, protruding eyes. "Harry couldn't have fallen in love with her," he thought and let go without regret an idea that had hardly been formulated.

A pretty wife for his boy had been one of his dreams; allowing even for a lover's exaggeration, Kitty must be better looking than this girl beside him. And she probably knew nothing of Carlton suppers and the Lady Vining manner of talk. "Pure as snow and summer roses," Harry had said, "without knowledge of anything in the world that is not best and beautiful." Sir George repeated it to himself: it was what he wanted, almost exacted from his nearest belongings. He was a proud man, with ideals that were lofty, and desires and ambitions that were set on honourable progression and advancement for his son—advancement not merely in the usual worldly sense, but that would lift him on to a higher plane than any to be attained by the ruck of hurrying, greedy time-servers. To this end he imagined a wife would help the boy, as he always called him in his thoughts. It was one of the reasons why he had encouraged the idea of his marry-

ing early, for he held that it was a woman's function to keep the ways of the man she loved beyond suspicion or reproach. Hence, too, the pleasure he had shown at Miss Bateson's remark to the effect that a possible regeneration of men lay through the ability of women to stand alone. He had no sympathy with unfeminine methods of supremacy—the cry of women for the Suffrage seemed to him almost grotesque—but he believed in an intellectual life for them, in their helpful companionship and unacknowledged influence in public affairs; above all in the desirability of preserving the old illusions regarding women in the hearts of men. Illusions were the intellectual chiffons with which men endowed the sex; without them it would be hard and even unbeautiful. But women, he thought, should be more exacting than they were in these days; demanding, when they were loved, those qualities that go to the making of the world, since nothing had done more for it than hero-worship. Probably his views—which were very strong, had become in fact almost a dogma to him—had grown out of the long intervals of lonely leisure at Highwoods, his place near Leafield. It was there that, as Harry irreverently put it, he had taken to thinking, read and considered his Darwin and Herbert Spencer, trying hard to assimilate them and the materialists who, unknown to themselves perhaps, were idealists too. His smatterings were dangerous in a sense, for they occasionally led him down a cul-de-sac from which he returned, metaphorically shaking his head, puzzled and doubtful. His standpoint, perhaps, may be described as that of fairly educated people in the eighties or early nineties. For those who had pushed beyond it he had chiefly im-

patience, holding them responsible not only for certain indecencies of the age but, since all things have their alternatives and reactions, in a measure for the frivolities of such people as crowded the Carlton to-night.

They moved to the Palm Court for their coffee. As they were going towards it Lady Vining put her hand for a moment on his arm.

"I do so want you to see a woman who has been at a table near us with an odd-looking party," she said. "She is so remarkable; wait—she is coming this way."

He looked round; a tall, graceful woman, who carried herself well, overtook them. She was not young, certainly over forty, but she was striking to look at still. She had evidently been very beautiful, and about her, even before she spoke, there was a magnetism that made it impossible not to look at her again and again: it was curious and not always pleasant, but there was no getting away from it. She had black hair in which a streak of grey showed itself, giving an air of spurious distinction, and neutralising to some extent a suggestion of commonness that, despite her physical advantages and the silkiness of a carefully-cultivated manner, was not to be overcome. She had large dark eyes with heavy lids that drooped and hid an expression of insolence and defiance—it had probably replaced a soft voluptuous one of bygone years; a clear, creamy complexion with the bloom of a ripe peach still on her cheek; a firm, almost powerful, mouth, softened by the curve and pale redness of the lips; not altogether a pleasant personality, but a compelling one.

Sir George recognised her. "Why, how do you do—I had no idea you were here."

She held out a hand and looked at him for a moment with a lazy light in her eyes and a smile on her lips. "How strange to meet you here! of all people—and how nice," she added in a lower tone. Her voice was deep and rich, her articulation so clear that it suggested the position of every vowel in her words. She left the soft white hand with many rings on it in his for a moment. "Are you staying long in London?"

"I am leaving to-morrow." He looked at her with admiration that was cold and tinged with disapproval.

"For dear Leaffield?" She ignored Lady Vining and her own party, which consisted of two weak-looking young men and a woman who, despite many aids to nature and an elaborate toilet, failed to look either young or attractive.

"No, not to Leaffield. I'm going abroad."

"And Harry, where is he?"

"In Italy." Sir George was polite but rather embarrassed.

"I must come and see you soon." She held out her hand again, clasped his while she finished her speech.

"I want to tell you about my cottage. I've bought the ground, and we shall be neighbours. I must buy a basket chaise and a vicar's wife's pony and drive myself to Highwoods. We'll have such long talks," she added in a low voice, "and read all the philosophers."

"Ah," he answered, "no doubt we shall arrive at a new system—of something. You must try and manage a week end next month. I shall probably have some people—a pleasant party." She was an excellent

guest, good for bridge or small talk, and sang little French songs in an undertone, with downcast eyes and just one upward look at a particular point, that still not only subjugated middle-aged men but brought youth worshipping to her feet. He didn't wholly approve of her ways but he felt some sort of obligation to invite her, besides she amused people and made a party a success. Moreover he had an underlying belief that she liked him much more than he could manage to like her.

"It would be too lovely," there was a thrill in her low voice. He was flattered, almost fascinated, for the moment, as he usually was despite some instinct that tried, he felt unfairly, to set him against her. "Well, good-night," he said, and turned resolutely to his own party.

"Oh, but who is she?" Lady Vining asked him. "She's wonderful."

The lady had evidently made her usual effect, he thought, as he answered, "She is the widow of a man I knew in India, a Mrs. Wrenford."

"A widow—how lovely!" Lady Vining exclaimed. "What a time she must have had."

Sir George hated her for it, and thanked God in one swift moment that his boy was not engaged to any of her set. "She doesn't find life intolerable even yet," he said coldly.

"She had Wilfred Brooklyn with her," the solemn young man remarked in a dreamy tone.

"Who is he? I don't think I have heard of him."

"He has written some wonderful poems. I can understand them now—that beautiful woman is an inspiration."

"Thousands of men must have been in love with her when she was young," Lady Vining said enviously.

"Well, luckily she can't be called young any longer," Sir George answered cynically. "I've known her fifteen years or more—she's—getting on."

"Oh, but you shouldn't say that," his listener said reproachfully; "always make out the best case you can for women—time makes a hard one, do what they will."

"You're quite right," he answered, and liked her better, but he turned to Captain Foster. He was too anxious and inwardly excited to preserve his best manners for people of the Lady Vining type, though the one human remark she had made had done something towards soothing him. The soldier had been on foreign service last year; he could talk to him; in two minutes he was in another atmosphere. Mrs. Wrenford and the friends whose appearance irritated him were at a table that seemed to have been chosen so as to be out of his line of vision, at the other end of the Palm Court. Now and then it struck him that she was keeping an eye on him. He remembered the readiness with which she always accepted his invitations to Highwoods and felt more lenient towards her: she probably found it a relief to get away from the shady people with whom she had entangled herself.

"By the way, Kerriston," Lord Detner said, when the extinguishing of first one light and then another gave warning that closing time had come, "I want that son of yours. Where is he now?"

"In Italy."

"Will he be in London after next week?"

Sir George nodded with a pleased smile. "You mean you—will have something for him?"

"I think so. I should like to have a talk with him."

"I am greatly obliged to you, my dear fellow," they were old friends and shook hands cordially, "it's the thing I want most for him. I hope you will like him."

"I am sure I shall."

"I start for Italy to-morrow, to join him. Probably we shall return together at the end of the week." He had made up his mind quite definitely to this within the last half-hour.

The next evening, remembering with a smile Miss Bateson's instructions, he was on his way.

CHAPTER XI

BUT Francis Wendover got there first. He had been going to Cannero on the day he was asked to speak at the Royal Institution. That was an honour he did not want to refuse, for he liked the grey beards and bald heads (he was as irreverent as Miss Bateson), and was delighted on many counts at facing so distinguished an audience.

He was in high spirits in the little rooms above the theatre at the Royal Institution after his lecture, for naturally he was the lion of the gathering, and thoroughly enjoyed the congratulations on his achievements, though he pooh-poohed the idea of their being described as wonderful.

"Nothing to boast of, I assure you, sir," he said in reply to an exalted person's compliments. "Sound of wind and limb, a love of adventure, plucky followers who do as they are told; and the rest is a matter of luck—that's what most expeditions depend on—it did with us. We had a glorious time." He laughed low down in his throat as he said it. The exalted person thought him a good fellow, and worth knowing.

The next morning with a light heart he stretched his long legs on the platform at Victoria waiting for the Continental train. But he did not get to Cannero as fast as he wished. There were people in Paris who had to be seen and consulted, for he did not easily put aside matters connected with his work. A man with a breezy sense of enjoyment when enjoyment was

possible, of great persistence and strong definite feelings of all sorts, careful of the way he took, but careless what was thought of it, satisfied with the results of his expedition, or fairly satisfied—for no man worth his salt feels that he has done quite so much as he might have done—and on his way to Helen Roberts, Francis Wendover felt that life was worth living. He was not a whit impatient, though lagging made him fidget. "Anticipation is part of the real joy of life," he said to himself, "sometimes the best part; much better to wring it dry; though all the same it is a good thing, to live in every hour as it comes and not to moon and dream about those that may follow; so I'll have a good dinner in Paris to-night, if I know it, before I find out precisely how to get to this precious hole in which she has stuck herself."

Nevertheless, he did some unmitigated swearing when he found himself at Luino on Sunday night too late to get across to Cannero. He champed up and down the shore, till gradually the still beauty of the place pacified him. "After all, she has an eye for scenery, always had," he said, and thought of a lake, in the Austrian Tyrol, beside which he had seen her first in the long years ago. "Dear obstinate woman, I should like to give her a good shaking, and kiss her till she begged for mercy; though it would feel like sacrilege, for she feels so confoundedly like a saint. I needn't trouble myself; I shall never get more than a polite shake of the hand, and a smile or two from her blue eyes, no matter how I behave. This time she'll probably say she's getting old—what the devil does it matter to me how old she is? She's the woman I love best in the world, and there's an end of that."

By this time his good humour had returned. And again he contemplated, with considerable interest, the possible details of a dinner that would assuage the hunger besetting him. "After all, a woman's a woman, especially if you love her," he told himself, "but there's something to be said for a good dinner, when you've lived for months together on two meals a day, with nothing much at either of them." He turned sharply round to a picturesque creature in rags who was gesticulating beside him. "Well? What on earth?—I don't understand your gibberish—or not much of it. A guide? No, I don't want a guide; I've been ten times farther than you'll ever go in this world or the next, and in stranger places—what the devil should I want a guide for? Garibaldi? yes, I know that's Garibaldi stuck up on the pedestal. Do you think I can't read? I took off my hat to him—what more do you want? Frescoes in the church? Why, in the name of all that's rotten, should I go and look at decayed frescoes when there's a lake, a decent road to tramp, and mountains on their hind legs either side of the way; besides, I shall be gone in the morning before the church is open. If there had been a boat, I should have crossed that ditch to-night."

He reproached himself for the description, the next morning on board the little steamer going over to Cannero. He looked back at Luino and up at Monte Genaro and the dim patch representing the hotel—it had just come into his vision with the widening stretch of water. "Nothing much better to be had, I should say, than this blue lake with that old ruin in the midst of it," he thought, as the boat passed the castle on the little island, where centuries ago the Massarda brigands

had kept their stronghold. Monte Carza, with the villages high up on its side and Cannero at its feet, was fronting him; he could see the iridescent mantle of bloom that had settled on it; the scent of the oranges and acacias was wafted to him as the boat passed the primitive line of terraces near the shore. He gave a long grunt of satisfaction as with lingering happy steps—he enjoyed every one of them—he strolled along the lower road. Some dodge giving man immortality, or as much longevity as he could stand, and a shelter in a place like this between the spells of work, and it was possible he might be satisfied, he thought. “Oh,”—as he went up the hotel steps—“you’re the waiter I suppose? Well, I want a room and some breakfast.”

A few minutes later he stalked into the *salle à manger* to a table by the window. He had arrived. Excitement dropped from him as he looked round the white-washed room. On the right of him a young man, evidently English and alone, was breakfasting; at the other end a couple of Germans were arguing with each other—there were no other people. Through the glass doors at the end he could see the vestibule, and the boy carrying in his bag; beyond two further glass doors the salon, which Miss Bateson had not admired. There was no pretence about this place, he thought; but it was quite good enough. The waiter came up to him presently with paper and pencil. “Want me to write down my name, do you—well there it is. I shall be here a couple of days, not more, and you must give me a better room—with a balcony. Now where’s the Villa Elena?”

“Mrs. Roberts?” Giovanni was anxious to show

that he knew the right way to describe an English-woman.

"That's it." He had reached the door by this time. "Mrs. Roberts."

The Englishman who had been breakfasting alone sprang forward. "The Villa Elena—are you going there?"

"I am." He looked with undisguised pleasure at the attractive countenance of his questioner. "Shouldn't wonder if they expected me. I'm called Francis Wendover, who are you?"

"I say! How splendid! I'm Harry Kerriston." He put out a hand, and grasped the elder man's.

"Then you're the youngster engaged to Kitty—that's good." They shook hands vigorously. "I like the look of you. Come and show me the way."

Breakfast was still going on at the villa; it had been later since Lady Burfield's arrival. He followed Harry into the dining-room on the ground floor. It was at the side of the house, and opened on to the garden that sloped upwards—'the other country' could be seen from it. Wendover was keenly sensible of it, in the one swift moment of his entrance, and for ever afterwards remembered the room by the little cluster of dwellings perched high on the mountain: it seemed to be looking in at the group gathered there; to have knowledge of it and in some still way of its own to be holding and safeguarding it. The table was by the window. Mrs. Roberts was at one end; a brass coffee-pot, very yellow indeed and highly polished, in front of her; a rush basket of little rolls baked crisp and brown, and other simplicities that had withal a touch of the picturesque. Lady Burfield, her hair with the slight

grizzle in it piled high, her face towards the window, was seated on one side; near her was Kitty, who had grown into a woman since he had seen her last. He took in every detail at a glance, and gave a suppressed shout that subsided into a low, happy, riotous grôwl, while their "little squeaks," as he called them, of delight and welcome were the sweetest sounds he had heard since the moment when he stood at the end of his march nearly a year ago, and turning to his comrades with, "We've done it—done it!" they had set up a cheer.

"Well, I've come! I wanted to see what you were all after—I say, but it is good," he added with a deep note that made his voice tremble. He grasped Mrs. Roberts's hands and held them tightly, while he looked long—or it seemed long—and hard at her face. "I can't believe it." He turned away towards Kitty, and looked at her too, up and down, then putting his hands on her shoulders, laughed for joy. "Grown up, have you?" he said. "Well, I don't care; you're going to give me a kiss."

"Of course I am," she laughed back, and put up first one cheek and then the other.

"I understand you're engaged?" He grunted and nodded at Harry. "Nice goings on; don't you think so, Lady Burfield? But it is good to see you all again," he repeated. "You'd better give me some food, or some coffee at any rate. I've had one breakfast—but there's nothing like grub when you feel that you can't stand any more—well, I don't know." He sat down and tried to laugh again; but something was tugging at his throat: he could have sworn at it.

"I knew you'd come," Kitty said.

"You'd have been a little fool if you hadn't, my dear."

"I mean to-day."

"Then you're a witch." He stared at her with beetling brows and eyes full of laughing admiration and surprise at her fresh young beauty. Then suddenly he turned to Harry. "By the way—let me see, what's your Christian name?"

"Harry," Kitty put in quickly.

"Well, I'm going to call him by it. Not going to stand any nonsense from the chap who's going to marry you."

"I should think not," Harry agreed.

"Humph." Wendover punctuated all his thoughts with little grunts and keen glances. "I believe your father—Sir George Kerriston, isn't he?—was at the Royal Institution the other night. Some one told me he had just got back from Scotland in time to come."

"That's why he hasn't written—he didn't get your letter," Lady Burfield said to Harry.

"It's all right by this time; we shall hear to-day. Go on, Mr. Wendover, tell us about the expedition. You must be awfully proud of yourself."

"Not I. What expeditions come to, as I said on Friday night—and I like to rub it in—is a good constitution, a knack of organisation, a capacity to do with long fasts—and a moderate amount of luck; the rest is with God or the devil. I enjoyed it, every bit of it—but I'm glad to be back and to get a long swill of such coffee as this. You all look so well," he went on with the frank simplicity of a backwoods-man. "I believe you've been doing the Sleeping Beauty business—waiting for me perhaps? Kitty though has had a

turn at Jack and the Beanstalk, judging from the way she's grown up."

"You haven't forgotten your fairy stories."

"Of course not. I'm younger than any of you—and older. I believe it's the fashion among a certain set of young fools to talk of the joy of life. There's wisdom at the bottom of it, as there is at the bottom of all foolery, if you go deep enough to find it. Well I've got it—the joy—thank God; so has Lady Burfield. I know that from the look in her eyes; I remember thinking it once before."

"And mother?" asked Kitty, looking at him, "has she?"

"It takes the form of love of Mother Earth with her, or did years ago."

"It does still," Helen said; "the world seems more wonderful than ever since we came here."

He nodded for answer. "Let the insolent young things say what they will"—he was looking at Harry and Kitty, who had done nothing to deserve the description—"youth is not a matter of years, but of temperament. I'm a battered looking old ruffian, no doubt"—a laugh rumbled at the back of his throat again.

"You're not," said Kitty stoutly.

"It doesn't matter if I am, my dear," he answered tenderly; "it's only a case with me—and with many others—of being in a crumpled envelope. A love letter isn't the worse for coming through the post in one—you'll find that out, I daresay." He turned abruptly to Lady Burfield, who had taken up her knitting, "is that grey stocking the one you were doing when I went away—I believe it is?"

"It's a descendant."

"And how is Sir James? I heard of his knighthood and remembered you were 'my lady.' I hope you noticed it."

"I always feel it's a shoddy title."

"Not a bit. It's given for merit. Can't always dig one out of the Middle Ages. I say, this is a bully place, and look here I'm only going to stay two days. You've got to show me all you can—so make up your minds what you mean to do with me. I've taken a room at the hotel; but I shall give you a good deal of my company, if you display any inclination for it. What's up there?" he nodded towards Oggiogno. "It seems to know all about us down here."

"It does," Kitty exclaimed. "It's the other country." She told him all there was to tell about it, for it was she who loved it most—who had sent her dreams to it, and gone to it in the keenest hours of her life. She had taken Harry up once or twice; they had made protestations to each other on the way, lingered, and laughed low, as they leant on the moss-grown wall, by the chalet that is half way up, to look down on the lake and feel how wonderful it was to live, to love each other and be young. "Oh, if it would never come to an end," she had said the first time—as if a warning message had been whispered to her.

"It never will—it never shall," he had sworn.

Harry took Wendover up, an hour or two after his arrival. The explorer proposed it; for he wanted to see what the youngster—as he called him—was like, to have him to himself for a bit. But they didn't talk much. Wendover was trying to realise his surroundings, and stopped at the end of a zigzag once or twice to look forwards, and upwards, and downwards. "The joy of

life?" he said again, "you know nothing about it at your age. You have only the excitement of the first fizzing, the sparkle and promise; the long draught is taken later—the real thing grows in the light cast by experience and knowledge, and if you get that, it carries you through anything; you can't quench it any more than you can put up a black canopy big enough to hide the sky from the earth. Ah," as he drew a long breath, "the world's a magnificent show. I should like to live to be a hundred." He strode on for a minute, then turned and looked at Harry again. "It was Mrs. Roberts who first sent me along this road of thought," he said, "and I've followed it ever since—though I've known some bad days, with starvation and freezing, and a few minor discomforts of that sort thrown in. But nothing matters in the end if you've the right sense inside your body—see how she has come through."

"Through what?" it was asked with interest, but without curiosity.

"Why—all she's suffered." Wendover looked at him with curious eyes half hidden beneath the overhanging brows.

"Of course," Harry agreed, and was silent for a minute while he remembered what Kitty had told him about her father—how he had died when she was a baby, of the long wandering years with her mother, and the careful education that fell to her, though the way of it seemed casual. For Kitty was now quite a good linguist and had read wisely if not widely. She knew the lives of many heroes, and loved them as girls do; she had been shown pictures by great painters, or copies of them; had heard music enough to recognise haunting passages by many composers; above all, she

knew many ways of Nature and the seasons. More humanity had been necessary to her life, contact with people and knowledge of them, and those emotions that are good for every mortal soul; the lack of them had made her restless and dissatisfied for a time, but now her lover had come and life was complete. "I think she's wonderful," he said to Wendover, meaning Mrs. Roberts of course. He was silent for a moment and then, still pursuing the same train of thought, added, "I love her."

There was a pause before the deep almost husky voice startled him as it answered: "So do I."

"What does your father say to the engagement?" Wendover asked presently.

"Nothing—as yet. I wrote instantly, of course, and suppose I shall hear to-day. He generally thinks over a thing for twelve hours before answering. It's one of his queer rules."

"But you told him—all about them?"

"Rather."

"Well, it will be interesting to know what he says."

"It will be all right when he sees Kitty," Harry answered, resenting even the ghost of an idea that it could be anything else. "He will be in love with her directly." His companion looked at him keenly and gave an assenting grunt: then they went on again in silence.

"Well, marm," Wendover said to Mrs. Roberts a few hours later, "will you take me a turn now? We haven't had any talk together yet—it would be agreeable to abuse those creatures," he nodded his head at the lovers. "What do you say?"

"Take him to Carmine," they said. "It's one of the loveliest bits in the world."

"You'd better," he laughed down in his throat again—they had learnt already to listen for the rumble—"or we shall be informed afterwards that it was the only thing worth doing."

"That's like Mr. Saxton," Kitty said.

"Saxton? Who's he?"

They told him how he had gone off to Viareggio and other places because Miss Bateson had talked so much about Shelley. Wendover pricked up his ears and ruminated. "Bateson," he said; "I believe she was at the Institution on Friday night. Wilson, the man in the hall, told me that an American woman had arrived there in the morning and asked if she could buy a seat. The old chap nearly had a fit—told me of it when I went in to arrange my diagrams in the afternoon. Tickled me—but if I'd known where she was I'd have invited her to come myself, for she said she knew some friends of mine. I thought she was lying, but now I expect she meant you. I heard that she turned up all right in the evening with a big man called Saxton, one of the members."

"They went together then," Mrs. Roberts said, and a smile spread over her face, for she had an idea concerning Mr. Saxton and Miss Bateson that was never likely to be verified. "But couldn't seats be taken for your lecture the other night?" she asked, being as unsophisticated as the American.

"Not in that way, marm—you couldn't pay at the doors, or book them—the Royal Institution isn't a place of amusement," he added with unconscious cynicism. "Funny I should have heard of her. But I knew

Saxton by sight years ago. This queer little world of ours has a way of doubling up till people touch each other like crumbs in a tablecloth that's going to be shaken, then scatters them far and wide—and perhaps they never come across each other again. Now, why should I have seen three people on Friday night who have more or less interest in you—those two and that boy's father?" nodding at Harry. "Never spoke to one of them in my life or heard their names before. There's something turning the handle of the machine and making a whiz of the atoms, so that you can't tell which way they are going; you may take an even bet on that."

They set off early in the afternoon up the mountain way to Carmine, but they hardly spoke for the first half-hour. Wendover apologised for himself. "Fact is, I'm not up to gabbling to-day. I'm too glad to be here—stupefied—drunk on the air and the joy of seeing you again."

She looked at him gratefully and was glad to be silent.

"You did well in choosing this place," he went on presently. "I can understand your being satisfied."

"They have been the best years of all. I've come to the end of my thinking here."

"And Kitty's going to be married?"

There was a questioning look in his eyes, but she only repeated aimlessly, "And Kitty's going to be married."

He pushed aside the brambles across her path, and helped her over a little running brook that intercepted it. They stood before a small green plateau that stretched between them and the next ascent towards the old-world village that stands high up, above a forest

growth, on the edge of a mountain precipice. Then suddenly, but hesitating, and watching the effect of his words, he said, "You've never been back to Hallstatt?"

"No." She resented the question. "I thought you knew," she added hurriedly, "that I only went there to get away from everything till I could bear to come into Italy again." She looked at the distances, misty and blue of many shades, and loved them. "Italy is my own country, more than any other. I was glad to get home to it."

"Pitching your tent on a different spot?"

"I couldn't have gone back to the same one and lived there. But some day I shall go to Sestri Levante again, just to see Mr. Godstone—my father's friend."

"A good thing to do no doubt," he answered absently.

They had crossed the plateau and were taking the roughly cut steps of a steep path that wound and zigzagged through the trees.

"I can hardly believe that in six weeks' time we shall be in London," Helen said in a low voice trying to shake off a sense of some unseen companionship: she always had it near Carmine. "Kitty is overjoyed at the idea. I am glad too, though we shall be strangers there—we shan't know how to behave—I wonder why we're glad to go?"

"Don't worry about that—take things as they come—it's much better."

Up and up to Carmine. They saw it sheer above them.

"I'll tell you why you are looking forward to it," he said, after a pause. "You may talk as much as you please about Italy, my dear, but you belong to Eng-

land. There are deep roots in us all of which we know nothing till something makes them sprout and starts them growing—the queer machinery again. Perhaps in a few centuries more we shall have accumulated enough intellect to understand it better.”

Up and up to Carmine and the ways of a bygone people. They could almost hear the silence as higher and higher they went towards the place that had had its youth and the joy of it in a far-off time they could not date or measure.

“I wonder what they knew,” she whispered, as they stood in the crumbling church, dim and still, its air faint with mustiness and decay and the stale fumes of incense: the secrets of the dead seemed to be held in it—to have been guarded there through half the ages.

“God knows,” he answered slowly as he looked round at the worn records of those who had lived and died hundreds of years ago. “Some of them were nearer the beginning than we are—they may have had knowledge they dropped by the way—as they came along: all we can do is to go on and on till perhaps the two ends meet and make a circle.” He bowed his uncovered head towards the blackened crucifix.

“Oh, if one could know—could be sure——” and then half afraid she asked, “Is it divine to you?”

“What does it matter?—it’s the symbol of love and suffering, the two things that have done most for humanity.”

They started on their way downwards again in silence.

“We ought to be better for seeing a place of that sort,” he said presently; “it stirs up feelings we didn’t know we possessed, and gives us a hint of what we shall all come to—but I can’t stand it sometimes, when

it occurs to me that this blessed world will go rolling on, hundreds of years, when I am left in the darkness.

"You can't tell—you don't remember now—you won't then; that's all."

Again a long silence, before he answered. "Perhaps they'll set it right some day—and we shall know all about it. I expect some little touch—the turning of a button—would do it."

CHAPTER XII

HALF an hour after Mrs. Roberts and Wendover had started for Carmine a telegram came from Sir George saying that he would be at Luino at four that afternoon. Harry and Kitty had gone for a walk to fill in the time till he came. Lady Burfield was alone, fiercely knitting at her stocking, thinking matters over once more. She was absolutely determined that Helen should be silent. Till this visit she had not fully grasped that the isolation of the marriage, the subsequent change of name, the lapse of time, and many other details served to make the whole tragedy a closed book it was unnecessary to open. "His father shall never know," she said, and turned her stocking the wrong way so that two rows had to be promptly unpicked, a little catastrophe that mitigated the comfort of her vehemence. "I won't move from this place till he has gone or she may break down and tell him.—Well, my dears," as Kitty and Harry returned, "you look very happy and flustered."

"We ran nearly all the way back," Kitty explained; "we were so afraid of being late for Sir George. I'm dreadfully frightened."

"Isn't it absurd of her?" Harry laughed. "You remember him, don't you, Aunt Robin?"

"Not very well," she answered discreetly.

"But Sir James saved his life or something?"

"My husband was a great doctor, of course. I am glad he has retired," she added with a little sigh.

They thought she meant because of the leisure he would enjoy; but she was thinking, "So wise of the dear owl to do it before they found him out."

"Well, anyhow, you remember that he wasn't an ogre?"

"He certainly wasn't an ogre," she answered. "He sent us a silver inkstand as a wedding present. Perhaps I will give you and Harry one when you're married."

"Dear Aunt Robin, how kind of you." Dear Aunt Robin clicked her needles vigorously.

Then Mrs. Roberts entered and was told the news. Her face twitched, for a moment; she seemed unable to speak. Harry, who saw it, thought how easy it was to frighten these dear women who had lived so long out of the world; he determined to say so to his father.

"When did you hear?" she asked.

"Two hours ago. We've taken his rooms at the hotel—he will be here directly." He looked towards the window. He had learnt, as every one at Cannero did, to set his time by the coming and going of the boats.

Then a silence fell on the little drawing-room only broken by the click of the knitting-needles. Kitty went to the loggia, as she often did when she needed courage. Mrs. Roberts stood thinking by the writing-table; Harry watched her and felt awkward. "It's lucky Wendover is here," he said at last.

"Lucky?"

"My father will like meeting him, especially after hearing him on Friday; and as he is an old friend of yours they can talk us over. By the way, where is he?"

"He went back to the hotel. Tell me some more about your father."

"I think I've described him pretty well already. Did I confide to you that he has an idea he knows all about modern movements, reads a little philosophy, talks about development and that sort of thing." He laughed, but his voice was affectionate as he went on. "I'm awfully devoted to him, and Kitty will be; there's something so straight and unflinching about him; and he has been a brick to me. I believe one reason why he never married again was that he didn't want to burden the property with charges on it. The worst of it is he expects one to do so much. However, we'll try not to disappoint him, won't we, Kitty?" She came from the loggia and stood by him.

"Perhaps he never wanted to marry again?" Lady Burfield suggested.

"Perhaps not," he hesitated a little; "still there's a Mrs. Wrenferd who comes round occasionally, a handsome lady. He gets fascinated by fits and starts, and sometimes I've been afraid——"

"Don't you like her?" Lady Burfield asked, trying to fill in awkward pauses.

"Oh, she's all right, I suppose, but I don't want her for Kitty's mother-in-law. She won't be a patch on mine."

"You don't know yet that your father will consent," Mrs. Roberts said. "People expect a great deal for only sons. He may think you ought to make a bigger marriage."

"Not he—I know quite well what he wants."

"What does he want?" Kitty asked.

"A nice girl," he answered solemnly.

"Am I nice?"

He looked at her doubtfully. "Well, rather perhaps; and he'd like her to be pretty."

"Oh—I'm not that?"

"I fear not. It's very sad—still you can't have everything."

"What else does he want?"

"Well—a clean slate."

"A clean slate?"

"Bill of health, you know. He doesn't like invalids, aliens, radicals, suffragettes, or—well, people who've gone off the beaten track in any way—I say, that boat's half-way here. I think I had better go. Come too, Kitty, he'll like to see us prowling up and down like two panthers waiting to spring on him when it lands."

"Oh, no, I couldn't."

He understood her frightened face. "All right, darling, you shan't. I'll beard him alone, take him to the hotel, land his luggage, and bring him on at once, if I may?"

"Yes—bring him on," Mrs. Roberts said. "Will you tell Mr. Wendover to come to me immediately? I want to speak to him."

"I will, if I see him."

Kitty went to the window and watched him striding on towards the landing-place. "I'll go and change my blouse," she said; "perhaps I shall be less nervous if I look nice." She stopped on her way to the door, trembling with excitement. "Oh, mother, I'm so frightened," she whispered. "What shall I do if Sir George doesn't like me? I should die, I think—I should die if anything happened."

Mrs. Roberts put her face against the dark head.

"Nothing will happen—I swear it." Such a strange answer Kitty thought as she went slowly out of the room.

Then Mrs. Roberts turned quickly. "Aunt Robin!" she exclaimed, "what are we to do?"

Lady Burfield put down her knitting. "Do? Why, nothing at all."

"I feel like Noah without his ark, and the deluge coming on."

"There won't be any deluge. Remember he knew my husband. He wrote to him the other day, dined with us once soon after we were married, and gave us a silver inkstand—what more do you want?" The twinkle came to her eyes, and was comforting.

"He was only a patient."

"But a grateful patient. It makes a link, a voucher. I'm glad my husband was knighted now, though it's rather snobby of me, for even that makes a difference; it shows that he was of consequence in his profession. And then you're a clergyman's daughter, my dear; there's something soothing in the sound—a clergyman's daughter, or a market-gardener's——"

"Oh, don't. I can't bear you to make a joke of it; it's life to Kitty and to me. I still think he ought to be told." It was said in dogged fear.

"My dear Helen, we've argued this out, and won't begin it again. We're not going to tell him. Why, your Uncle James would have to know, then; and I should be extremely mortified. Jack was my nephew; I have my own pride, and want to conceal the family scars." Lady Burfield felt that this was a really clever line of argument.

"Why—why has he come out here in such a hurry?"

"It's very natural. His boy's future is at stake as well as your girl's."

"Perhaps he'll ask inconvenient questions."

"Certain to—but we'll walk round them. If two women can't outwit one man, my dear——" She ended her remark with a nod.

"Oh, you're such a comfort, Aunt Robin Redbreast."

Aunt Robin was silent for a moment, then suddenly she looked up. "My dear," she said, "I wish you would marry again, it would be much better."

"Marriage didn't give me much last time," Mrs. Roberts answered with her strange smile.

"Francis Wendover is evidently devoted to you. I wish you'd marry him."

She shook her head. "I might have done so once, I couldn't now. We are good friends, but in my heart I've never quite forgiven him."

"Forgiven him?"

"He knows," Helen said with a little shudder. "He has known all these years." She took the knitting from the large, white hands, put her own into them, and sat down on the couch. "I told him soon after first we met at Hallstatt, when he was at the little hotel."

"But what made you tell him?"

"I was broken—and miserable. I knew that Jack had never given me his best love, the other woman had it, and she haunted me—possessed me; sometimes I felt as if I could do anything, no matter how desperate, that would shake her off—out of my thoughts." She shuddered at the remembrance, every word seemed to be ground out of her; it hurt every instinct she possessed to remember it, to own it.

"It's always the other woman that rankles most," Lady Burfield said grimly.

"Francis Wendover stayed on and on at Hallstatt. I saw that he cared, and gradually I thought that perhaps—oh, it's dreadful how much women want to be loved, to be taken care of——"

"Of course they do; we are all fools. Did he ask you then?"

"No, but I felt it was coming, and wanted to tell him first. We went for a walk one evening, up the mountain behind the little town, by a zigzag pathway that leads to the salt mine—it's more wonderful even than this place. We sat on a bench; there were hanging woods; through the trees we could see the darkness gathering over the lake. I was afraid he would speak before he knew, and hurried out of the woods, pretending that I told him just as a friend."

"Yes?"

"He was dreadfully sorry, but—but"—Lady Burfield's grip tightened on the hands she had taken—"he drew back. And that walk down—I dragged my feet along beside him as if they were made of lead. He was kind and gentle, but different—different—as if he were miles off."

"And then?"

"He made excuses, and went—two days later. He said all the things he could say—but he went."

"But he has asked you to marry him since?"

"Oh, yes. He came back; but the time had passed. That's why I am afraid for Kitty, why every time you say I needn't speak it's such a comfort and help—I wish Mr. Wendover would come——" she broke off abruptly. "I want to see him. I must speak to him

alone. Oh, I wonder if the boat is in." She went to the balcony. "It ought to be—it is—it is. Sir George has arrived." She came back to the room and stood still for a moment, struggling to be calm again; suddenly she caught sight of herself in the queer little looking-glass with the twisted iron frame that hung near the piano. "I must go and get tidy too," she said; "he won't think much of Kitty's mother if she looks like this."

"Go and make yourself beautiful." Aunt Robin was trying the effect of a compliment again.

"I can't. Look at my cheek-bones and all my crows' feet—I am so haggard."

"My dear Helen, go away and don't be foolish. You only want more flattery, and you shall not have it. Come back and bewilder Sir George; it will be very good for him." Lady Burfield was a little ashamed of herself; but she was rather amused at the whole situation, and looked forward with excitement to the next few hours.

Helen caught the infection of her good spirits. "You are shocking and rather immoral, Aunt Robin. You ought to take this matter quite seriously, instead of which you are disgracing the grizzle in your hair." She gave it a little caress, and went as she was told. It was so good to be told to do things—it made her feel cared for and young again.

Then Kitty returned flushed and frightened. "Shall I do?" she asked anxiously.

Aunt Robin surveyed her carefully. "Yes, my dear, I think you will. Are you very happy?"

"Dreadfully."

"It may be more than a girl's fancy—you've known

him a long time now," Lady Burfield said half to herself.

"Oh, yes, Aunt Robin." She knelt, as she sometimes did by her mother. "A long time, and we liked each other from the very first moment of all; he says we did. It's wonderful how he knows things."

"Of course, quite wonderful."

"But he thought it was better to wait till he'd done—oh, you know, the things you do before you finish up at Oxford." She looked at the kind face bending over her. "There isn't any one like him in the world," she added with sweet conviction.

"No, dear, there never is." Aunt Robin gave a long sigh, remembering long years ago, of which she never spoke. Let it be recorded here that she thought it distinctly well they had ended; but the petals are often excellent pot pourri when the rose tree is dead, and the garden in which it flourished once has been given over to the jerry-builder.

"There goes the Luino boat on its way to Oggebio!" Kitty exclaimed; "they'll be here directly."

"Why don't you go and meet them as they come from the hotel? You'd find it less embarrassing than staying here."

"I should, Aunt Robin Redbreast; it will be much easier." A sound on the gravel beneath took her with a bound to the window. "Oh, it's only Mr. Wend-over—but I'll go wait for them in the garden."

Helen Roberts put on a soft, trailing dress of the sort that was peculiar to her, and twisted her fair hair round her head; she had worn it so long years since when, in the cathedral at Chiavari, her husband had called her "Madonna of all the Ages." She remem-

bered it now and realised, as she stood before the glass, that she was beautiful still. She was glad of it, to be anything else would have seemed almost a disgrace; for was she not a part of the world she loved, and did she not owe it her tribute, her service, all she could do or be? Kitty, too, she reflected thankfully, would be beautiful long after the bloom of youth had gone; the form was there, the promise. "Jack dear, you would be proud of your 'little kiddie' if you could see her," she said sometimes in her thoughts. She told him even of the admiration that was given to herself—she recognised it, though she made no sign. It proved that his wife had been worth loving by other men and women; that he had been right in what he had actually given her. Unconsciously she used it as a plea for more—more—more; as if she felt that in some future world all things might be adjusted. And Sir George, she thought, should at least see that her husband had belongings who did not disgrace him. In a measure, the man who had died all those years ago would be judged by them, and for his justification, of any sort, in any form, she hungered and pleaded in her soul, arguing his cause, seeking out and pursuing any line of defence that suggested itself, vaguely wondering if somewhere and some day a strange clue would be found that would set all things right and his memory at rest.

"Well, marm, I hear you want to see me?" Wendover said, as he stood facing her in the little drawing-room.

"Yes, before you become intimate with Sir George."

"Oh—I've just been introduced to him—are we to be intimate?"

"You are sure to be, staying in the same hotel. He

will like meeting the distinguished traveller—he went to hear you the other night—he will see that you are an old friend”—she could hardly bring out her words —“and he may ask questions. I thought of it this afternoon, but I couldn't speak then.” She sat down helplessly and waited for an answer.

He considered for a moment. “Questions?”

“Oh, I dread them so.”

“About——?” She nodded, and waited again. He turned away abruptly, crossed the room, looked up at the “other country,” as Kitty had done, then returned, and stood before her. “But you are going to tell him?”

“No.”

He seemed almost aghast; his eyes were full of pain, as if he hated himself for worrying her. “Well, I shan't give him any information, you may be sure of that. I didn't know you till afterwards—can tell him so if I'm put to it. But he ought to know.”

“He never shall——”

“Suppose one day he found out? It would be far worse—my dear, he must know.”

“He might put an end to the engagement and break Kitty's heart. You don't understand how much she cares; I didn't till lately—it has eaten into her life. In the winter she was different altogether—ill, anxious, watching, half-lifeless—till she knew Harry was coming.”

“You must tell the father.”

“I won't, I can't.” It was said with a long, anxious sigh. “Her heart is full of happiness—why should it be wrested from her?”

“It wouldn't be wrested from her.”

"Oh, it might; something Harry said an hour ago showed me that. Men are not so sentimental as women, not so tender."

It hit him hard. "Aren't they?" he said ruefully.

"No, not easily at any rate; it takes time to grow." She was trying to qualify her words. "He might insist on its being broken off—I can't risk it."

"I twigged this morning that the boy didn't know when I was out with him, and wondered what you were going to do. Look here," he went on, "I've known all these years—and—and—I haven't given a hint of it this time, but you know perfectly well that the desire of my life has been to marry you——"

"You wouldn't, long ago."

"I've loved you since the day I first saw you, at Hallstatt, standing by the lake, a forlorn girl, holding Kitty by the hand."

"But that night, on the road up to the salt mine, you drew back. Think what Sir George and Harry might do—Kitty is the daughter of a criminal!" Her tone seemed to put them far apart, farther even than they had been before.

"Upon my life," he thought, "I don't believe she's human sometimes; that amazing way of hers makes one feel as if she had walked down through damp clouds to be stuck into a shrine." He stood hopelessly staring at her till she looked up, surprised at his silence.

"You drew back," she repeated.

"It's no good not being straight; it was an awful shock and took me by surprise—why did you tell me?" He strode across the room again and came back with a growl. "Why did you?" He insisted.

"I knew you cared. I felt it. I thought you would

ask me, and that if you did, perhaps——" She hesitated.

He could hardly bear it. "Go on," he said huskily.

"I think I should have taken you."

"My God!—if I had known. But I went back to you that autumn, before the first expedition?"

"It was too late. Don't let's talk of it; it's over and done with. You have been the faithfullest friend in the world."

He hardly listened to her last words. "Done with?—you're so dummy!" The speech was abusive, but the manner contradicted it. "I've loved you all the years since, and you know it. While I was away there were not many hours when you were out of my thoughts. I wanted to tell you so to-day when we stood in the wood beneath that old church at Carmine, but you choked me off."

"I didn't want you to tell me."

"At Hallstatt I was staggered for the moment—taken by the throat. The case had been in every one's mouth. It took the wind out of me, I own; but I got it back. Am I never to be forgiven for being an ass and a fool?—always to be sent away?"

She held out her hands to him. "You are always to be sent away," she said in the same even tone. "The possibilities have passed by. We are good friends; let us remain so. More than that we can never be."

"My dear woman——" he said brokenly.

"Yes, I like you to call me that. Let us thresh this matter out once more. I should be no good to you. You had better go elsewhere for marriage. It ought to be some one who will face the world with you——"

"Face the world—but you are supposed to love it."

"Yes, but it must be beautiful for me—nothing else. I told you why I went to Hallstatt, and why, as soon as I dared, I came back to Italy—that the beauty of it might give me strength and courage. It's everything to me. I couldn't——" She stopped, and held out her hand in apology.

"Couldn't stand the rough and tumble?"

"No. I want a sheltered life, and always to be satisfied with what I see."

"Saint in the niche business?"

"Not much saint, according to you. I'm not doing even a straight thing, for at any risk I'm going to be silent."

"It's cruel."

"No, it's wise. It's kind to those two children. As for it's being wrong, or unfair, or anything in the world—I can't help it. It's Kitty's happiness I want, not the whiteness of my soul."

"Praise be to the devil for that at any rate. He has leavened you a little, after all. I believe I like you the better for it. If you go on in the same direction I may have a chance yet." He laughed, and walked round the room, happy and good-tempered again. After all, this romance of his had been half a dream—a comfortable thing to reflect upon a thousand miles away, but one to which realisation might add anxiety. Oddly enough, he knew it, though he chafed and growled at the knowledge. He was retreating once more into the dream-world, the shelter-place of his thoughts, ruffled and disturbed, but not so much hurt as he imagined, and pleasantly savage with her—taking her refusal as part of the day's work. "I sup-

pose I've got to put up with it," he said, by way of a postscript to the discussion.

"I'm afraid you have." There was a smile in her eyes. He accepted it as a pacification, and gave a grunt to show it.

"Oh, well! Now, what next? When is this old buffalo coming? Do you want me to get out?"

"No, I want you to stay; you'll be a protection—especially if he's a buffalo." She rang the bell.

He went to the window, and looked down at the garden. "He's coming now—the youngster has him in tow."

It was a little procession that entered a minute later—Kitty first, happy and triumphant. "Mother," she said, "here is Sir George."

Then Harry, with his head thrown back. "We've got him, you see."

And last Sir George, with a smile on his clear-cut face and a searching expression in his alert eyes.

"I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Roberts," he said cordially. They shook hands. His voice was pleasant and she liked it. But a little shiver went through her. She felt even in that first moment—she saw it as if a flashlight had been thrown on his nature—that he was kindly, but stern and practical; without countenance for anything beneath the surface, and with disapproval of a good deal above it—a man who knew what he meant, and would have it done if he thought it necessary.

He looked round the room without moving an eyelid, and took in the charm of it, the grace, the air of culture, before he turned to answer her polite question as to the pleasantness of his journey.

"Well, good-bye," Wendover said to Helen. "I'll see you again later."

"Oh, but you must wait for tea—it's coming now."

"Ah! I am longing for some," Sir George said. "English customs are delightful outside their native land, even more than in it."

Wendover nodded his head, as if he were punctuating the sentence, then made a movement towards the door, but he caught Mrs. Roberts's eye with an entreaty in it. "Well, tea or any other temptation is always agreeable," he said, and stayed.

CHAPTER XIII

"He started the day after he had my letter," Harry explained, as they gathered round the little tea-table. "That's why we didn't get an answer."

"I am the answer to it." Sir George artfully concealed Miss Bateson's share in sending him. "Naturally I was anxious to see any one so interesting to you—and to me—as this young lady."

"She was afraid you would be an ogre," his son informed him.

"I trust she won't think me one. I wasn't afraid that she would be an ogress." He gave her a kindly smile.

"Do you hear that, Kitty? Wait till he knows you better—eh?" Wendover put in, knowing the value of a little joke when the air is weighted with embarrassment.

She tried to answer in the same key. "I was only afraid he would find me out at once."

Sir George's quick eyes told him that the air of self-possession was assumed. "It's an awkward hour in a girl's life," he said gently. They liked him for it. "But she is coming through it gallantly."

"It's even awkward for me," was Mrs. Roberts's apology for spilling the tea.

"For us all," he answered. "But we shall come through, as splendidly as Mr. Wendover did the other night. I was privileged to be there, and I can't tell you," he added in his almost courtly manner, "how

delighted I am to meet him; to know that he is a friend of yours and Kitty's. He is a great person."

Wendover's laughter rumbled down his throat. "Thank you," he said. "I'm astonished to find that a little enterprise, only undertaken because I thought I should enjoy it, has turned me into—almost into a somebody. It shows what impostors somebodies often are—doing things they want to do, having a thoroughly good time, and cutting a figure in the world on the strength of it."

"Ah! that's your way of putting it——"

Then Lady Burfield entered, with a pleased expression on her kindly face, her head thrown back, her knitting firmly grasped in her white hands.

"I'm delighted to see you again," Sir George said, going forward cordially. "I hope Sir James is well?"

She was pleased and taken by surprise. "I thought you would have forgotten me."

"Impossible, you are so little changed—not at all, in fact."

"How kind of you to say it," arranging herself and her worsted comfortably on the couch. "I needn't ask how you are?"

"A living testimonial of your husband's skill. I'm sorry to have missed him in London; but perhaps it is to his absence there that I owe the pleasure of seeing you here?"

"This old chap makes his little cut and dried speeches as neatly as figs are laid in a box," Wendover thought.

"I am really on my way to him," Lady Burfield explained. "When he has made a visit to an old colleague in Lemberg, we are going to settle down, or

rather up, on a Swiss mountain for the summer; but I wanted to see these dear creatures first."

"I am quite sure you did." He looked round, and felt satisfied, even pleasantly surprised. Lady Burfield and Mrs. Roberts were charming. As for Kitty, "Just lovely!" came to his remembrance. He turned to his hostess. "I met two friends of yours the other night—and supped with them," he was almost gay as he spoke of it, "after your lecture," turning to Wendover.

"Miss Bateson?" Harry asked.

"Precisely: Miss Bateson, and Mr. Saxton—a great admirer of yours, my dear." He turned to Kitty, she blushed, and he was delighted, so few girls did nowadays. "A most estimable gentleman," he went on. "I met him last year in Somersetshire. We waited in the same farm-house while the tufters did their work. I don't know if you understand?"

But Kitty did. "The red deer," she said.

"The red deer!" he echoed. "You evidently take an interest in your own country, though you have lived so long out of it."

"Do tell us about Miss Bateson." Mrs. Roberts was glad to find a subject. "We are going to stay with her shortly."

He gave them a little account of the supper-party and how it came about.

"She is evidently a lady of enterprise," Wendover remarked. "I shall have to go and see her."

"You will," Harry exclaimed. "She picks us all up like beads on a string."

"Well, it is better than scalps." Wendover put down his cup and made a movement towards the door

again. "I want to get a walk before dinner and see a little more of this place, for I'm off in the morning."

"In the morning?" Lady Burfield looked up. "But you only came to-day."

"Don't go to-morrow," Mrs. Roberts said, feeling that this sudden change of plans was the outcome of their talk just now.

"You simply mustn't," Kitty declared.

"I'm glad you all take it so much to heart. I shall gloat over your regrets, and should like them to be as poignant as you can conveniently make them. But I'm going all the same."

Harry put down the change of plans to an idea that it would be better to get out of the way now that Sir George had come and family topics were in the air. He put his hand on Wendover's arm. "We shall be quite cut up if you go," he said.

"I rejoice to hear it."

"My father has been looking forward to a talk with you——"

"I have, indeed," Sir George said fervently.

"My dear chap, I should have been delighted." Wendover was speaking to Harry, to whom he had taken a liking. "I'm not going because, under the circumstances, I should be second fiddle, but because I've a great deal to do. I've seen Mrs. Roberts," he explained to Sir George, while a smile looked out of his deep-set eyes, "and Kitty—and," he nodded affectionately to Harry, "I know how the land lies. We shall all be in London soon; but I am afraid I must go in the morning. I'm a rolling stone."

"And want to continue the rolling," Sir George said, with his best air of mild humour.

"That's it. We shall meet at dinner. Besides, we're at the same hotel, and there's always the mid-night hour to pamper with discussion." He escaped with a laugh that was almost a groan of relief.

"I'm not made for family groups," he thought as he strolled past the factory and round the edge of the lake. "Moreover, the good manners of that amiable buffalo would seriously affect the chastity of my language if I saw much of him."

The sun was flashing a farewell till the morrow down on the deepest blue of the lake, pricking it with gold. The air was soft and scented. On his right, among the still trees and thick undergrowths, he could see masses of flowers. It was all exquisite, but his mood had changed since the morning. "I should get tired of it," he thought. "It's scenery for poets, and painters, and women: I'm not a sentimentalist. I like a gaunt outlook that sets one's teeth on edge and makes one's nerves like iron—she would be all the better for a little of it. I should like to have her on a raft, with a rug and my arms round her; but I never shall, so there's an end of that." He pulled out a pipe, sulkily stuffed it full from a huge brown pouch, smoked, and was gradually content again. "He ought to be told," he said to himself presently. "However, it's no business of mine."

The prolonged tea business and the polite talk made Harry impatient too. "There's a launch going by. Let's run down and look at it," he said to Kitty. "They don't want us any longer, and it's time to worry for the afternoon letters." In two minutes they were laughing on their way to the little narrow street that led to the post-office. The house that served for it

looked so deserted and unofficial it suggested that the letters were brought in silence and secrecy, or had been written in some other world to dreamers in this one who were not yet awake. "It was here that I had your telegram," Kitty said as they entered the stone passage, "just as I came to this little window." He kissed her. The kiss and the telegram always met afterwards in her memory.

The three people left at the villa looked at each other a little awkwardly; the time had come and there was no shirking it.

"You have a charming home," Sir George said, to fill in the gap till the real talk began. "English comfort in an Italian villa—really a Paradise."

"I think so, too," Lady Burfield remarked, and grasped her knitting.

"I have loved it very much," Mrs. Roberts said, "but it's coming to an end. The owner of the villa wants it back again."

"Have you always lived abroad?" He began his questions warily.

"Nearly all my life."

"Still, England is your own country?"

"Oh, yes."

"And a very beautiful one."

She remembered Mr. Saxton's conviction that its scenery was equal to that of Italy, and smiled. "It's wonderful how English people love it. Mr. Saxton says it's as lovely as Italy."

"And he's quite right," Sir George said firmly. "He is a man, I should say, with many sound views." He hesitated a moment before he added: "He told me of his proposal to Kitty."

"Told you?" Mrs. Roberts was amused as well as surprised; it cleared the air of some embarrassment. "Told you?" she repeated, leaning forward.

Sir George saw how blue her eyes were, and for the first time it dawned upon him that she was beautiful—and the Italian setting made him feel as if the days when the great pictures of the Madonna were painted might come again; the sitter was waiting, only the Masters lagged: it was very curious, he thought, continuity was possible everywhere, though the overgrowths often hid it, so that only at far reaches or by accident it found the light again, and then not even to remember it. He thought this out quickly, and was pleased with what he imagined to be his own subtle reasoning, before he answered: "It took me entirely by surprise, for I had never seen him before. He probably thought it would interest me."

"Of course it was impossible in every way," Mrs. Roberts explained. "But he was very kind. I'm afraid we used to think him rather dull at first, but we knew him better at the end, just as we did Miss Bateson."

"I liked them both. There was an admirable frankness about them, and I'm glad to think that through you—and Kitty," the manner in which he annexed Kitty as often as possible in his talk suggested that she had made a pleasing impression, "I shall probably see more of them."

"We shall be near them both soon."

Perhaps he thought there was regret in her voice, for he spoke in the quick firm tone of which she was half afraid already, "I hope you are looking forward to it; I think, if you will allow me to say so, that one should live, for a certain number of years, at any rate,

in one's own land; unless, of course, there are strong reasons against it. Perhaps when Harry and Kitty are married, you will make your home in England?"

It struck her that he was feeling his way to some authority over her, that he thought it should be the outcome of the relationship that was to exist between them. She didn't resent it—the being-taken-care-of sense is grateful to every woman; for a moment she rested in its comfort before she answered: "I used to think I couldn't live without mountains and scenery."

"There is scenery in England." His eyes went round the room again and lingered on the tops of the acacia trees, on the blueness of the lake and the dark line of mountains beyond. Then he looked at Lady Burfield. She gathered up the stocking and the ball of worsted from her lap. His manner showed that he expected and would approve of her departure; but he hurried in a remark about her industry. "I always think when I see a stocking being knitted, that it is suggestive of a really comfortable home."

"How delightful of you; I must tell James. And now, I'm sure you two would like a little talk." She looked at Helen with an expression that said plainly, "To tell him is impossible."

"Don't go away," Mrs. Roberts said. "Aunt Robin has been so much to me, Sir George; she is the only relation we have left."

"I am quite sure that she has been kindness itself." He accompanied most of his airy statements with a little movement of his head, but of its interpretation they were as yet uncertain.

"But, my dear Helen, you must have things to

say." Lady Burfield made a pretence of going; but she had not the least intention of doing so.

"Nothing that cannot be said before you, indeed, Aunt Robin Redbreast," Helen said. "Are there things to say?" she asked him. She was calm enough outwardly, and the fear clutching at her heart made her manner seem proud and cold—shy and reticent—it seemed to him, and he liked it. In a vague wondering manner he felt that it would be easy to fall in love with the mother, just as the boy had done with the daughter; perhaps this accounted for Wendover's hurried visit: Cannero was a long journey to take for four-and-twenty hours, mere friendship was hardly a sufficient reason.

"Things to say? Well, yes, I suppose there are," he answered courteously, but evidently meaning to say and to hear them said.

"I never had a daughter engaged before."

"Nor I a son. I hope you approve of it?"

"I like him more than I can say; we all do." Helen glanced at Lady Burfield, who had gone back to her corner and the knitting.

"I'd no idea what was going on—you might have knocked me down with a feather," he said; "very foolish of me, I suppose, for he often spoke of the charming girl he had met at Andermatt, niece of the distinguished doctor and his wife," an inclination of his head towards the couch. "But though I always hoped he would marry early, as a matter of fact I hadn't realised that I had a son old enough to think of it yet."

"They liked each other a year ago," Mrs. Roberts said.

"So he tells me."

"Something in a letter from Aunt Robin then made me think it possible that—that"—he nodded to show that he understood her—"and I telegraphed to Kitty to come back at once. They were both so young."

"That was prudent, perhaps; for, as you say, they were both so young."

"And I knew nothing—nothing more till the day before he arrived; I want you to understand that—quite to understand it."

The absence of enthusiasm in her manner, the aloofness, appealed to him; it suggested that she was not a mother anxious to marry her daughter. "These young things circumvent us sometimes," he answered. "Luckily you needn't be uneasy about him, my dear lady; he is a good boy. I can vouch for him——"

"And she for her girl," Lady Burfield put in quickly.

"Who is delightful to look at," he said cordially. "'Just lovely,' as Miss Bateson told me," at which they all smiled, but were not driven away from the subject towards which they were steering.

"She is delightful altogether," Lady Burfield added.

Sir George addressed himself to her. "Her father was your nephew?"

"Yes—my sister's son. He was a wonderful creature."

"I am sure of it. Kitty has a delightful inheritance." He gave a quick glance towards Kitty's mother.

Lady Burfield made a little sound of satisfaction. "I think so, too; and it is wonderful how well she is educated; you will discover that."

"She has evidently had wise and excellent guidance."

"Being abroad, of course, has made some accomplishments easy," Lady Burfield said, while she thought, "You strike me as being rather a handful, my dear Sir George, and if you saw much of my beloved James you might become pompous."

He meanwhile was intent on getting the information he wanted. "What was your nephew's profession?" he asked.

"He was a barrister—of the usual briefless variety; but luckily he did not altogether depend on it."

Another satisfactory motion of the restless head. "He died very young?" in a sympathetic voice.

"He was thirty-two. She," nodding at Helen, "was barely twenty-one. They had so little time together."

He was still more sympathetic. "Thirty-two and twenty-one. She needed all the care you could give her, for I gather she had no mother of her own."

"My mother died when I was a child," Mrs. Roberts said.

"Not of consumption?" It was asked quickly.

"No—of some complication at my birth."

"Ah!" with still another sound of sympathy. "Your father was a parson, Harry tells me? Was he in London?"

"Yes, till my mother died; then he went to the Riviera, where he had a chaplaincy."

He waited a moment. "A little hush for the clergyman's daughter," Aunt Robin thought. She would have liked to wink at him; nevertheless her anxiety kept apace with her excitement.

"And you were an only child, as Kitty is, Helen?" he asked.

"An only child, as Kitty is."

"A great misfortune. I hope the tradition will not be carried on. I believe in home ties and human relationship. The most beautiful sight in England, to my mind, is a country house and a family—a moderate family," he added, with an evident desire to lighten the conversation, "of boys and girls growing up in unity and affection."

"It is a happiness you have missed yourself," Lady Burfield remarked in a voice that she hoped was sufficiently sympathetic.

"That is so," he answered. "My wife died while she was still a young woman. Within a month our elder boy, Ambrose, followed her."

He rose and walked across the room, then standing with his back to the window, went on. "They died of scarlet fever, caught at a Paris hotel. I carefully mention this, to show you that there is no hereditary disease." He turned to Mrs. Roberts; his voice was reluctant, but unflinching: "I don't wish to rouse painful memories, but your husband died so young?"

"Yes," she echoed faintly, "so young."

"What was his complaint?"

"He died of pneumonia; he was only ill a week."

He sat down again, reassured. "Quite so, any one is liable to it. I have felt bound to put some questions to you, even if they are painful. You must forgive me—I have very strong feelings on hereditary matters."

"The survival of the fittest?" Lady Burfield asked, beginning to feel dismayed.

"The survival of the fittest," he repeated; "the stamping out—the isolation of disease, and of moral as well as physical disease. It is the only effectual remedy."

"Stamping out?" Mrs. Roberts said with a little thrill in her voice.

He fidgeted with his collar, pulling his throat up above it, and repeated, almost sternly, "Stamping out—it may sound harsh, even cruel, but it isn't, it's kind, it's merciful in the long run."

Lady Burfield turned her stocking and began another row. "Of course," she said calmly, "I didn't know you were so scientific."

"I am not—nothing of the sort. I am a Churchman and a Conservative—a scientific man is generally neither. But I'm a stickler for certain things that I consider to be right—right, not only to ourselves, but to the race, to the world. We needn't go into this matter now, since it has nothing to do with the one we are discussing." He turned with a smile to Mrs. Roberts. "I don't know, of course, whether your child has any fortune?"

"She will have a little at my death; I have about four hundred a year—I fear I must keep some of it while I live."

"You must keep it all," he answered promptly: "there is no occasion to give her a sixpence. Harry will be extremely well off, and I like the theory that a wife should depend on her husband. I will see to their income. I only exact that the girl he marries shall be sweet and good and charming——"

Lady Burfield clicked her knitting-needles and snapped, pleasantly, "She is all three."

"She looks it," he said, and repeated, "sweet and good and charming—and that she bears an unblemished name." The whole room seemed to listen as he said it.

"It is everything," Lady Burfield answered; her voice was almost defiant, she held her knitting high for a moment as if looking for a dropped stitch.

CHAPTER XIV

THE click of the needles went on, but no one spoke. Sir George looked up: for a moment it occurred to him that in some way he had given offence.

"Of course, you know nothing of our family," he said. "There are not many of us left; my sister Elizabeth, to whom I went the other day—she is a widow and lives in Scotland most of the year—and myself are the last of the older generation. I wish you to know our family history, what there is of it, and that we ask for nothing we do not give."

"I am sure of it." Mrs. Roberts heard her forlorn little sentence as if from a distance. "He must be told," she thought, "at any cost—he must—must be told." Her hand went to her throat, as if to steady her voice, her lips moved, but no words came.

Sir George, luckily, was intent on his own credentials. "We have nothing to boast of," he continued; "no long descent. For reasons I need not enter into, we are sufficiently rich, but we have no inherited great possessions, nothing that puts us by right in high places, except our records of a few generations back. We have kept these clean, thank God, serving our country in the various professions open to gentlemen who work for a living. It is among these, I take it, that Kitty's father was included, as your distinguished husband is now?"

He had inclined his head towards Lady Burfield, who, seeing that Helen was recovering from her pa-

ralysis, answered quickly; but she could not for the life of her help an undercurrent of amusement betraying itself in her voice. "You are quite right, he does"—she ignored the reference to Kitty's father—"though now he belongs to the leisured class. I thought you knew he had retired?"

"No—I imagined that he was only taking a holiday. You are probably delighted to know that he will be able to follow his own inclinations in the future?"

"Not at all." She thought of the over-good dinners her James would eat, the indolent life he would encourage himself to lead, and the disastrous effect it would have on his figure. "I think he would have been happier working for the next ten years—but no doubt his"—she had nearly said "reputation," but changed it in time—"his health would have suffered. He is not a self-regarding man," which was quite true, though not in the sense in which it was taken. She was talking against time, anxious to keep Helen's lips closed; if they opened now she felt that the tale would be told, and Kitty's happiness turned to tragedy. Then suddenly "the children," as she called them, entered.

"Letters, letters, mother. A nice fat one from Miss Bateson. It's her writing," she explained to Sir George; "probably she has written to tell us about the supper-party, I'm sure she has—and there's a little note from—from Mr. Saxton to me—he heard about us—from Miss Bateson. He is an old dear," she said gratefully.

The ring in her voice silenced her mother, and delighted Sir George. It was love for his boy that had made this charming girl so happy. He looked at her again and thought that she would be beautiful as she

grew older, as her mother was, though in a totally different way.

"Have you heard of the impending calamity?" he asked.

"Calamity?" It was Mrs. Roberts who spoke—a ghost seemed to be at her elbow.

"I am going to take Harry away with me the day after to-morrow."

"Must you go then? It's nearly as short a visit as Mr. Wendover's." Her tone was regretful; she tried to keep down a feeling of thankfulness.

Kitty eagerly explained. "But it's splendid, mother dear. Just think! Harry has an appointment. We are so proud of it—and we shall be going, too, soon."

This was the right way to take it, Sir George thought, and turned to her with a smile. "You will feel leaving Cannero," he said, "but I hope you will be glad to see England?"

"I am simply longing to go."

He took her hands cordially. "My dear Kitty," he said, "I am delighted to hear you say it. I shall be impatient to see you, not only in England, but at Highwoods, our home at Leafield. It will be yours soon, or one of your homes, for your husband's work may keep you mostly in London. I hope you are satisfied in your own mind that the country one—since I must be there for the present—will not contain an ogre?"

"Quite." The colour had come to her face at the mention of the relationship in which Harry would stand to her being put into actual words. The world was opening its gates and disclosing side issues to its most wonderful ways that took her by exquisite but confusing surprise.

"Look here, don't you want your letters?" Harry asked. Sir George had not noticed the two that were being held out.

"For me, already? But I spent a night on the way; of course they have had time to overtake me." He looked at the addresses. "Mrs. Wrenford—I met her the other night; she is a remarkable lady in her way," he explained to Kitty, "who is building a cottage a few miles from us. You are sure to know her."

"Is she very agreeable?" Lady Burfield asked, and looked at Harry with a twinkle in her eye.

"She—she has qualities," Sir George answered, and turned to Kitty again. "You will see her soon; she is coming to stay at Leaffield, probably in June. I hope you will be there." He put the letter in his pocket and looked at the second one. "This is from my agent," he remarked. They felt the compliment of his telling them who his correspondents were; it conveyed that he looked upon them already as identified with his affairs. "I have been having some trouble about a fence—people who wanted to encroach, a corner of land they tried to get for purposes of their own. If they had been above board I might have acted differently. I'm afraid I'm a stickler for a good many things, Mrs. Roberts—but for nothing that is likely to affect you. I hope you won't think me unbearable."

"I think you are kindness itself," her slowly moving lips answered. The words were cordial, but the tone was almost frigid.

She was very cold, he thought, and had a difficult manner; but perhaps she was warmer when you had

known her longer and learnt how to manage her. Women wanted managing, of course; he liked them for wanting it—it proved that they were feminine—and to be feminine was a woman's first charm in his opinion.

"I think we ought to be getting back to the hotel," he said to Harry. "Mrs. Roberts expects us again at—eight o'clock is it?" he asked.

Luigi was hastily improvising a suitable dinner for the occasion.

"At half-past seven—we are early in Italy."

She gave a long sigh of relief when the door closed on them; and listened acutely to their steps descending the stairs—going through the garden, and along the road. Thank Heaven they had gone—that for an hour or two there would be peace.

"Mother, are you ill?"

"No, a little tired," she answered, with the long-distance-off manner that made all questioning impossible. "He's a kind old man—not old either," she added, feeling that some remark was expected from her. She drew Kitty to her, almost sadly, and kissed her: "I am going to lie down for an hour. Luigi will see to everything." She went slowly to her room. They heard the door shut and the key turn in the lock—it always made a lumping sound as if it had swallowed the person inside. Lady Burfield could almost see her lying face downwards on the bed, shutting out the world and everything that belonged to it.

Sir George walked with his son along the upper road. "She's a most charming girl," he said, when they had

talked things over. "It is not an ambitious marriage, but she is precisely the type I hoped you would marry. What a beautiful woman the mother is!"

"I know. I am immensely fond of her."

"A little cold in manner, perhaps?"

"I like it."

"So do I—so do I. Kitty was delightful about your going back."

"She is a little brick."

"By the way, did you know that Saxton had proposed to her?"

"Saxton! Why, no. How did you hear of it?"

Sir George told him of their walk along Berkeley Street, and his surprise at Mr. Saxton's communication.

"Good chap," Harry answered. "There's something sound in his not being afraid of saying he has been refused by a girl. It was a little absurd at his age; but I expect he would have done all he knew to please her."

There was a long pause. It was the time at which, every afternoon, the jangling bells of the church, midway between them and the lower road, gave out a short, confused peal, as if some erratic ringer were practising. Harry waited till it was over, then screwed up his courage.

"If Detner takes me on, I suppose I shall have to be in London most of my time?"

"Probably—in fact, of course."

"Well, we have only that small flat in Victoria Street—awfully noisy. Doesn't it strike you that it might be a good thing to get married pretty soon, set up a decent home and that sort of thing?"

"Oh, that's it?" Sir George looked at him keenly. "Have you spoken to Kitty?"

"No; only just thought of it. But you always said you would like me to marry early. We shouldn't want much money."

"There would be no difficulty of that sort." In all matters that had to do with money Sir George was singularly generous.

"I should like to try and make a little."

"I want you to make a career, which is much more important—the people who have enough already should remember that it puts obligations on them to struggle towards greater things." It was one of the moral things that Sir George occasionally said—not in a prig-like manner, but because he felt the truth of them. He considered Harry's suggestion a minute. "I should like to know them a little more intimately. Let us keep this notion to ourselves till they are in London or at Highwoods."

"You are not disappointed—with Kitty—in any way?" His father's hesitation had prompted the question.

"Most certainly not, my dear boy, but, as you know, I like to consider things before I commit myself to them. I am delighted with her—taken by storm." He paused for a minute. "It would have been a greater trouble to me than I can say if it had been otherwise—if you had become engaged to a girl of whom I could not approve—to any one who was in any way undesirable."

"I shouldn't have done it." Harry turned his face towards his father and spoke with decision. "I know you are reasonable enough, and you have always been

splendid to me—I told them about you only half an hour before you arrived. And if last year, when I realised how things were going with me, I had felt that they would be likely to cause you any unhappiness, I should have cut and run. Hi! Wendover!”

By way of a hanging wood, past the church of the jangling bells, and a little cemetery of many black crosses, up a steep path, and through a narrow gap in the stone wall, Wendover came out to the upper road.

“Hallo!” he looked at Sir George. “What are you doing here, you two—singing a hymn of praise to our ladies of the villa?”

“You have guessed it. They are delightful.”

“Ah, I’ve known that for a great many years.”

“For precisely how many?” Sir George was still eager for details.

“Fifteen—thereabouts—sixteen perhaps.” Wendover fumbled in his pockets.

“Mrs. Roberts must have been almost a girl?”

“She was, and Kitty not much more than a baby.” He pulled out the brown tobacco pouch, turned it over absently, and put it back.

“Did you know her husband?”

“No; he had been dead some time.”

“Poor thing. I wonder she never married again.”

“She has been too much taken up with Kitty; as for anything else,” he laughed and growled, “she sets her affections on mountain ranges and that sort of tomfoolery—looks as if she’d walked down them from Heaven, and contemplated walking back one day without paying any gate-money, though I think she has a

knack of enjoying this world too, after her own fashion."

"It's the type of the Madonna," Sir George agreed; "quite different from Kitty's."

"Quite." The fumbling process had reached a crisis. "Yes, I have—if you don't mind I'll leave you, for like a consolidated idiot I have left my pipe by the lake, or dropped it on the way up."

"I'll look for it while you walk back to the hotel," Harry said.

"No, thank you, old chap—you won't know the precise spot on which I squatted; and I never put a roof between my head and the sky if I can avoid it." He grunted and disappeared down another gap in the wall.

"Choked off the buffalo that time," he thought. "Worst of it is, that boy's so young he might be played upon pretty considerably. Wonder whether he'd fight it out or chuck it if the old man cut up rough." He picked up a pebble and threw it savagely into a cherry-tree. "But he ought to know, or the boy should at any rate. The marriage won't take place yet, I suppose; but it's the devil of a hole." He threw another pebble at the cherry-tree, pulled out his pipe from a side pocket, looked at it, and put it back. "Well, that lie served its purpose," he said, "and helped me to skulk off without being offensive."

Helen Roberts was at her best that evening. Sir George and Wendover almost hung upon her words—they were few enough, but a smile came often to her lips, and what Kitty called "mother's dearest look" was in her eyes. Harry, leaning against the balcony with his back to the lake, the darkness veiling the fact

that his arm was round Kitty's shoulders, stood silently watching her.

"Sometimes she's like no one else in the world," he whispered to Kitty, "except you," which he felt bound to add.

She nodded for answer. "I know; it's when she's happy. It seems as if the world had dropped from her shoulders and she stood on it, alone in the universe, calm and triumphant, while human beings looked up and wondered." Kitty had been reading a minor Italian poet, hence this profundity.

Harry blinked his eyes and discreetly hid the amusement in them, while he wondered how she got hold of that idea; but there was often so much hidden away in a girl—it made her awfully fascinating, and you couldn't even guess how she came by it. He knew his father's theories well enough; he remembered them now, and looked at Mrs. Roberts again.

"There's something fine about her," he said. "I don't believe she ever did anything that wasn't top stroke in her whole life." It would have been like the flick of a lash to her if she had heard.

They leant forward to listen to Wendover's rumbling laughter. "The fact is," he was saying, "you overrate my courage. Sir George went forth like a knight errant but fortified with the company of Mr. Saxton." They were talking of Miss Bateson.

"Let me assure you that you will find her most agreeable and refreshing," Sir George said. "She suggests the breezy atmosphere of a new world."

"Well, if she comes from New York I never heard that it was particularly breezy, though it has many other characteristics to which we are gradually growing accustomed."

"Shall I give you a message to take to her?" Mrs. Roberts asked.

"That might help things," Wendover answered, "for though, if I may modestly say it of myself, I am usually as bold as brass, yet to go and attack a single lady in her bower for no particular reason is a good deal worse than leading an expedition."

"But she'll love seeing a hero," came from the balcony.

"My dear Kitty, if you are abusive I shall come over and, in spite of that upstanding six feet of protection by your side, box your ears. I've known you long enough to give myself that gratification—if necessary. It seems rather hard that a common-place ruffian may not go out and enjoy himself without coming back to be called a hero."

"You were the first man there, Mr. Wendover," Sir George remarked impressively.

"Well, if you come to think of it, some one has to be—everything started from one spot or one man; I daresay the earth did, and we have been told that humanity did; but you can bet Adam didn't think much of himself. It's the same all right along the line," he went on in his inconsequent manner; "there's a wigwam in the beginning and a palace at the end, but the imagination goes back to the wild Indian, who was probably an elementary savage. Some lonely adventurer puts up a hut on a desolate tract and a big city grows; it isn't any credit to the first man, who just wanted a shelter for his head, though a statue may be raised to him in the end as the first settler. It's a matter of luck—fame is a fluke; wealth, the chance throw of a gambler; comedy sets out to find itself turned into a tragedy, and so it goes on."

"But the virtues, Mr. Wendover?" Sir George said solemnly; "the man who is thrifty and careful, who does great things because of his desire to achieve them?"

"Well, no doubt he's very praiseworthy, but he's enjoying himself all the time, and listening to the applause of what he is pleased to consider his conscience. I never see where the merit of doing what you like best comes in, nor in seizing your chance of doing it."

"But what do you admire?"

He thought for a moment. "Well, I admire a man who is tempted to be unwise or immoral and isn't. It proves that he has some power of resistance; power of any sort provokes one's admiration—sometimes against the grain, and occasionally it's all that it does provoke. I don't know if you follow me, but——" He stopped aghast, realising the construction that might be put on his words, and looked towards the woman he loved, dumbly telling her he had not meant it for her—it was an accident of speech, and asking her forgiveness. She understood, and her eyes told him so.

"Frankly, I'm not sure that I do." But Sir George, who had noticed nothing, only felt as if he had met more than his match. "It would be a great pleasure to have further opportunities of doing so. Perhaps one day we could persuade you to come to Highwoods when Mrs. Roberts and Kitty are with us."

"That sounds very agreeable—in fact, it's so agreeable that if you don't mind, as it's ten o'clock and I want to get up early enough to get a stroll before coming here to make my bow, I'll retire to the hotel to meditate upon it."

Sir George returned to the hotel with him. "What

about pampering the midnight hour?" he asked, as they went together up the steps. He was beginning to feel that this explorer was somewhat elusive.

The suggestion produced a shake of the head. "I think it'll have to be done another time. To tell you the truth I'm tired, and feel like cultivating a little beauty sleep." With a shake of the hand they parted.

"Dodged the buffalo once more," said Wendover to himself, as he watched him go towards the billiard-table with Harry.

CHAPTER XV

THE middle of June. London at its best. Mrs. Roberts and Kitty on their way.

Miss Bateson had had a busy month, but now she was ready for her visitors. The rooms looked charming, there were flowers everywhere, the chintzes were somewhat crumpled—"rucked" she called it and she had mitigated the newness of the library, "a little shabbiness is so suggestive," she thought. "Why, I'll never forget how much I respected that Scotch laird up in Perthshire when I saw the worn places in his tartan stair carpets; it made me think of the feet of his ancestors going up and down in armour—I could almost hear it clink." She had to hire more servants, which saddened Bogey, though he was consoled when he found they were only demure-looking maids; "for if there's anything I can't bear," she explained to the surprised young lady with frizzy hair who presided at the desk in the registry office, "it's seeing men at work that women ought to be doing: a nigger may do anything but a nigger's a nigger." There was something else to be done; it cost her a good deal of thought, but she felt that it would be impossible for Mrs. Roberts and Kitty to go about in cabs. Cabs were expensive, she wouldn't always be there to insist on paying, and she wanted them to be her guests all through their visit. "I ought to get a carriage, I expect; but I don't want to have it after they're gone." A motor, the quickness, the excitement of it, would have suited

her, but she firmly declined one. "It goes along," she explained; "just gets there while horses are turning the first corner to the right after you leave the house, but no one who'd been in Italy would dream of having anything shut up except at night, and people have a way of looking rowdy in an open motor, anyway of looking their worst, and as we'll be three women we shouldn't be pleased, least of all Kitty." So she jobbed a serviceable landau; it grieved her not to put cockades on the servants' hats, she thought them "smart and English looking." She told Mr. Saxton so. He had made an excuse to come to London when he heard the date on which Kitty was to arrive, and called once or twice.

"I'm glad you like English things," he said, being a tariff reformer, and firmly convinced that our national salvation lay in that direction. "Of course you can't have cockades—women don't."

"I know; I met Mr. Hartwise the other night, and he told me. He is something in the Herald's College; but he says lots of people use them who oughtn't. However, I suppose it isn't fair to your country to be ridiculous while you're away from it; when you're at home it's a family affair."

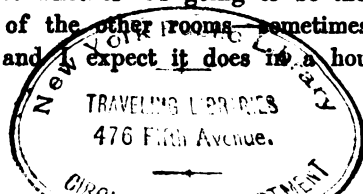
The landau got on Miss Bateson's nerves before her visitors arrived. The coachman would come asking for orders in the morning. She couldn't invent them. It made her fidget to go for a drive; she hadn't patience to "sit back," as she called it, in a carriage and amble along with no particular point in view, and it was a worry to stop the horses every other minute if something interested her; besides, it meant speaking into the coachman's back, which was undignified. She

reflected that her health was good, her boots excellent, a brisk unflagging walk she thoroughly enjoyed, "and I won't be worried with that carriage any longer than I can help." It occurred to her, however, that a cart with a trotting pony might be agreeable, so she promptly acquired one of the glorified governess variety. This really pleased her. She had visions of driving herself about the quieter ways of London, in the Park, and round the Embankment, and of taking Kitty; she speculated on the probability of Kitty not being able to drive herself, and the pleasure of teaching her. Later perhaps, if there were time before the marriage, she would give her a mare, and take her to a riding-school.

It was wonderful and almost pathetic to see how much she looked forward to her visitors. But the cheery little woman had never before had a human relationship that strongly appealed to her. Her mother, who had not cared much for any one but her husband, had died years and years ago. Her father had been intent on various schemes that never succeeded; her grandfather was an irritable money-maker; her brother, unconsciously resentful as she had been of the scant affection and sympathy vouchsafed to them, had developed into a crank, whose interests left him no margin for consideration of family ties. Her own waif-like wanderings about the world had been extremely pleasant but unproductive of sentiment, save for abstractions, till she met Mrs. Roberts and Kitty. She looked forward eagerly to their arrival, and fancied that as the days went by the house seemed to know they were coming too, and responded to her excitement. "I wasn't born to these things," she said, shak-

ing her head dubiously, "or at any rate I wasn't brought up to them. They'll take to them like ducks to water. Darragh used to say that environment tells most; but it takes you a long time to fit into a new one at my age. That little drawing-room at Cannero has served them for one—that and the scenery in which they've framed themselves, and the poets and the essays they read and thought over and talked about. It's been different with me. I couldn't catch on; why, I even forgot about Shelley. Wonder now where I left his books; it was either in the hotel at Genoa or the waiting-room at Lecco, anyway they're gone."

When everything was ready for her visitors, she showed the result, not only to Mr. Saxton, but to Wendover. He had duly presented himself, and found it easy. In a quarter of an hour they might have been friends of a year at least. They listened to each other's speech with smiling eagerness; his rumbling laugh delighted her. "Why, he is just delightful," she thought, as he walked round the double drawing-room that had seldom been used, calling it the capital. She wondered what he had meant afterwards. "But I expect a house is like a country, it's got to be kept and looked after just the same. He said that everything was a type of something;" from which it will be gathered that Wendover had talked some of his jargon to her as well as to his friends at Cannero. "Perhaps he meant that the room in which most is done is the capital of the house, but as far as this one goes I don't know yet whether it's going to be the drawing-room or one of the other rooms—sometimes it shifts in countries, and I expect it does in a house. Any-



how, he's a wonderful man, and he's lovely when he swears. I believe he and Darragh would get on."

All the morning on which she said this to herself her brother had been vaguely in her mind, at the back of her thoughts. Perhaps some other self hidden away in her, different from the conscious one she used for everyday life, knew that he was taking his way through the streets, and would presently stand hesitating for a moment at the corner of the square, looking up at the trees that had put on their summer green.

She had finished all her arrangements for the day—the one on which Mrs. Roberts and Kitty were to arrive. Satisfied but tired, she sat down in the morning-room just to realize the comfort of knowing that she was ready for them. A little pleased smile parted her lips; the freckles on the top of her nose were deeper, as if already the sun had retouched them; the lines on her face showed more than usual, but it was only fatigue that caused it. She wore a linen collar, a watch-bracelet on her arm, and a dark-blue dress that had evidently seen better days; she looked as if she were accustomed to the activities of life and had little experience of its luxuries. The room, as she scanned it, charmed her. It had small leaded panes to its windows, with flowers and masses of maidenhair in their deep recesses, soft silk curtains, a carpet thick and green as moss, and rose-patterned chintzes on the seats. The high art-monger might have said that the tones were not subdued enough, that everything was too new, but the effect was excellent; it looked fresh, like a place to be happy in, it suggested youth and the morning time of days that would be good to live. Under the puckered blind the golden light came towards her;

she held up her hands and caught its warmth—little capable hands that still wore some of the sunburn, and here and there freckles, larger than those on her nose, that brought remembrance of walks at Cannero, of reaching down trails of honeysuckle, of lingering in the woods on the way from Oggebbio while the gold of the sun flecked the pathway and the blue of the lake looked through the leaves in the distance. "Wonder if I'll ever go back," she thought; "believe I'd like Darragh to see it. He'd be the only one I'd care to take there." The feeling was prompted by the fact that the roots of their lives had been the same; and a vague idea that from them might sprout interests and sympathies for which there would be understanding and acceptance. "Only I'd like to do something bigger," she thought. "Mr. Wendover's sort of travel, now." She remembered a peaceful, dreamlike hour at the villa, when Kitty read aloud some verses that had taken her fancy:—

"Salt with desire of travel
Are my lips; and the wind's wild singing
Lifts my heart to the ocean
And the sight of great ships swinging."

"That's like him," she thought. "I expect it's what he's felt; but I have"—she was almost startled as she realised it—"I have, too, and Darragh has; daresay many of us feel alike."

There was an undeveloped double knock. She heard it plainly, for she was on the street level. "That might be Darragh," she thought. "It's the sort of knock he'd give if he'd been told I was living here and didn't believe it." She got up and stood by the

fireplace, waiting as if the self that had known of his coming had told her that it would be wise to gather her heart and soul together. Then Bogey, with a broad grin on his usually solemn face, opened the door and shambled a step towards her.

"It's Mr. Darragh from America," he said.

The newcomer entered quickly; before he spoke he looked round to see that the door was shut.

"Well! Darragh!" She looked up as if waiting for him to set the scene.

"Why, sister," he said, "I didn't believe I'd ever find you. Did you get my letter?"

"Yes, I got it; but only a month ago. I didn't know where to answer."

"What in the world have you been doing with yourself?"

"I've been wandering about Europe. I can't believe it's you."

"Well, it is." He scanned her face curiously, as if to gather her recent history from it. "You may put your bottom dollar on it, Elsie."

"Think I won't." It was odd how American they became in tone—the ghost of an old habit haunting them.

"We'd better begin by taking a good look at each other. Think I ought to give you a kiss." He stooped and touched her cheek, and she realised with a sense of loneliness and isolation that no one else had kissed her since she left America, save Kitty—just once, on the landing-stage at Cannero, the moment before she started: that sort of thing didn't come her way. Then they sat down and took another long look at each other. In some unaccountable manner he reminded her of

Mrs. Roberts when she turned her gaze towards the tops of the acacia trees in the garden or the mountain range beyond. A slight young man of thirty or more, though at first sight he might have been six-and-twenty, not very tall, but thin and supple looking; his face pale and long, his hair very fair and thick, combed back from his forehead, his eyes and smile those of a visionary. A more pronounced twang than his sister's, a more delicate personality, probably a more indefinite and unpractical nature; a man who saw realities plainly, but dreamt over them till without knowing it he had changed their meaning to himself.

"Well?" Again he reminded her of Mrs. Roberts. "Perhaps it's having the same ideas that gives them that expression," she thought. "It's different, yet the same, like a lamp giving out the colour of the shade that's over it, but the light under it is just the same. Only Darragh isn't good looking."

"Well," he said again, surprised at her silence, "what do you think?"

"I don't know yet," she answered. "Tell me where you've been all this time."

"We'd better wait for that. It's a long story, and if you set me talking I mightn't stop. I want to know what you're doing here."

"Why, I'm living here—should have thought you might see that." The tone of her voice showed that a sense of kinship, of nearness, was letting satisfaction steal into her heart; she realised it with quiet wonder. Perhaps, after all, there was something in relationship.

His eyes wandered round the room. "Well, you've got a place."

"Yes, I've got a place," she echoed. "Isn't it queer?"

"Queer isn't in it! Wonder if grandfather knows."

"Oh my—do you remember the attics up in East 29th Street?"

He nodded. "I remember—we shivered a good deal on winter nights."

There was a pause before she said: "He did well by us at the last, anyhow."

"Couldn't take it with him; he had to leave it to some one."

"Wish we'd cared for him more—after all, he gave us what we have now."

"There are better things than money; he could have given us them long before."

"Well, we didn't get them," she said with a sigh.

"And we'll carry the marks of all those years, right on to the end."

"They'll be useful—they'll make us understand."

"Daresay. Are you going to marry, Elsie?"

"Why, no, I'm not a marrying sort, Darragh."

"Then what's all this for?"

"I thought I'd like a home, best sort of home to be had in London, that I'd just try it and see what it felt like. Perhaps you'll say it's extravagant, but it's better than stock-exchanging or buying a big diamond necklace to keep in a case most of its time and wonder if a burglar is coming along. I haven't done anything of that sort."

"Seems like a nice house."

"And every room in it is nice; you shall see round presently. There are things to look at in them all, books and pictures and bits of china. But 'tisn't right.

—'tisn't right—I tell you that, Darragh." The pathetic note came to her voice, the suggestion of sing-song.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I go up and down and feel as if I hadn't any business here, as if I didn't belong."

"How's that?"

"Can't think—can't think, Darragh."

"It's the environment."

She looked up at him. "You still think that way?"

"Why, of course. You see you've brought your body here but your soul will never get used to it. All those years with the old man in New York," he rose and stood on the hearthrug, "and the others—before, when father and mother were struggling along, over at the other end of London, and didn't take much notice of us—they've made a sort of wrapping round your soul, and the atmosphere of this place can't penetrate through it, and when you get into strange places, different from the sort we've known all our lives, you don't feel at home. You'd better bring different people in here, Elsie. You'll never be able to do with it alone."

"Well, I've friends coming to-day, suppose you come too? I never had a brother staying—in a house of my own—I'd like to see what that feels like." He made a sign of dissent. "There'll be a lovely girl here; you can lose your heart to her if you like; but it won't be any good, she's taken."

"Not me; I'm not going to stay with any one, even you. I like being on my own and not in any one's house, but I'll come and see you plenty, if you want me."

"Anyway, you'll come to your dinner to-night. Mrs. Roberts and Kitty will be here and Sir George Ker-riston."

"You're getting grand, Elsie."

"Why, no, I don't feel that way."

"Well, what do you want these people for—do you like them?"

"Yes, I do. Mrs. Roberts and Kitty are just as sweet as they can be; and the house will know them fast enough, you'll see; they're the right sort. Mrs. Roberts has suffered—don't know how, but she has; she's been living in Italy thinking it over, making Kitty fit to be grown up. Now she's going to be happy—both of them are."

"What are they like?"

"They're beautiful."

"I'll come and see them."

"You shall, but here's Bogey. It's half-past one, and there's food in the dining-room; we'd better go and eat it."

His face lighted up as they sat down to the table at which Mr. Saxton and Sir George had looked across to each other a month ago.

"Tell you what it is, Elsie, you've got taste."

"It isn't mine; I'd only the money to pay for it."

"Well, it's a good thing they had it—whoever did all this—and that you had the money to pay; it's right spending, it's building up pleasure for those that'll come and see."

"Don't follow you a bit, you're too vague."

"Well, isn't it better to sit down in a room like this than in one that's ugly? If I had my way I'd make ugliness a crime—if it could be helped, and it often

can. It accounts for more people being miserable or sent to prison than anything else."

"You're talking the old nonsense, Darragh," she looked up at him with a smile. "Cold and starvation and unkindness are bad—but they aren't ugly."

"Ugliest of all," he said quickly, "and love and pity are beautiful; if that were seen plainer they'd grow faster, they'd be cultivated—they'd flourish." He leant his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his hands: into his eyes there came a light that bewildered her.

"It's wonderful how much you make me think of Mrs. Roberts," she said. "I believe you're on the same tracks though she's never talked to me this way."

He roused himself a little. "Well, I want to hear about these people."

She told him how she had first met them, thought of them, and gone back and insisted on their coming to stay with her.

"'Twasn't you," he answered, "but just something you recognised without knowing."

He pushed his plate away. "I want to know more," he said. "Go on talking, Elsie, I want to lay hold of the life here. I don't know anything about it yet; but every unknown is a nut one ought to crack, for in it may lie the secret of the universe." He looked at her while he spoke, wondering and curious—this queer brother who was groping after the meaning of life, the hidden truths that the great thinkers have been seeking through all the ages; but with this difference—the thinkers had hung one on the other, followed in each other's steps, guided and encouraged, had known the directions to seek to avoid—he knew nothing; but, long-

ing and courageous, was trying to solve the mysteries alone. He had met none who could help him. He had read nothing; for, eager to see and hear for himself, he had not stopped to reach down books nor to listen to preachers, but strode on with untiring feet, with outstretched hands and ceaseless indefinite longings—seeking. What he sought he knew no words to define, even his own thoughts could not do that. Hence his ventures into speculation were sometimes absurd or childish, occasionally even grotesque; and yet they had the value of all first things, for in first things the seed of immortality is sown, though ages may pass before it reaches upwards to the light.

CHAPTER XVI

SHE met them that afternoon congratulating herself that they arrived at Victoria; the drive to Berkeley Square would show them London at its best. She wanted everything to be at its best for them. She was rewarded by the surprise and pleasure on their faces, for everything was new, not only to Kitty, but to Mrs. Roberts, who had seen very little of London before; and her saddest memories were not bound up in it.

"It looks so gay—so happy; there's no squalor," she said.

"Well, no; they don't squalor about here—they're happy and I want you to look happy too; just now I expect you are tired?" Miss Bateson said, for the Madonna-like face was thinner than it had been at Can-
nero, an anxious haunting appeal seemed to be in the blue eyes.

"No." The smile with which the inquiry was answered was almost affectionate, but so wan that Miss Bateson longed to put her arms round her and to declare there was nothing in the world she wouldn't do for her; but as the carriage was open, and moreover it was just passing Buckingham Palace, she restrained herself and turned to Kitty, who was eager to ask questions.

"Why, yes," she told her, "that's where your king lives. I don't know what it's like inside, for he hasn't asked me there; and I don't expect he will. Outside it doesn't look anything wonderful. If they were to put

two or three more stories on top it would look better; that's what they'd do in New York anyhow. That green paling is round the place where there's to be a monument to Queen Victoria; they're a long time about it, but I suppose one day she'll pop up like a Jack-in-the-box; she needn't hurry, for she'll have a long time to stay once she gets there, and every year she'll grow a shade darker."

"Oh, but London is beautiful!" Kitty exclaimed.

Miss Bateson beamed as if she were its private owner.

"I am glad you say that. I do hope you'll be pleased with the house—and the trotting pony; if you don't like the cart and the trotting pony I think I'll go in a corner and die."

"I shall love it." Kitty laughed.

"It's too bad Mr. Kerriston didn't get to meet you. He sent three telegrams altogether. They were pretty frantic—you shall see them; it seems Lord Detner keeps him rather close."

"He'll come the first minute. I know he will."

"Anyhow he'll be there at dinner—and Sir George."

"Who is devoted to you," Mrs. Roberts told her, remembering all he had said at Cannero.

"Well, he's managed it quickly," Miss Bateson answered, "for I've only seen him twice altogether. He called the other day and spoke some most beautiful sentences, but we didn't laugh once. If you want to be really at home with any one, and get to know them, you've got to laugh together; it's wonderful how far it takes you. Now, Mr. Wendover—ten minutes after he'd arrived I wouldn't have minded calling him by his Christian name."

"He would like it; I will tell him."

The colour mounted quickly to Miss Bateson's face, her lips closed over the two rows of little white teeth, she looked almost frightened. "I believe I'd run away if you did," she said.

"We wouldn't let you do that for the world. Besides, what should we do?" Kitty asked.

"Well, I expect you'd go to Lady Burfield."

"She's on the top of a Swiss mountain with Uncle James."

They turned into Piccadilly. The carriages and all the signs of wealth were wonderful to the girl who remembered only the simplicity of Cannero and other little places in which her life had been spent. "Oh," she said, leaning forward, "how rich London must be and how contented."

"It's like a dream." Mrs. Roberts felt as if she were in one, and looked inquiringly at half-remembered points of the way, with the fear of waking on her.

"Dearest, what is the matter? You seem so sad," Kitty leant towards her.

"Do I? But I'm not sad." She raised her head, happiness was written on her face—grave and reluctant, but it was there.

"Oh, mother, mother," the girl whispered, while their hostess looking round at some people she recognised, "I love you so—and Harry does too."

Miss Bateson turned on them suddenly. "Haven't told you something yet; don't know if there'll be time, or if you'll be glad to hear it." Her voice was eager and anxious.

"What is it?"

"Well, Darragh's come."

"Darragh?" They had heard his name before, but forgotten to whom it belonged.

"My brother Darragh; he's a crank, one of the largest size cranks that's made, and perfectly complete I should say, but I want you to like him. I'll be awfully sorry if you don't."

"Of course we shall like him."

"You'd go into a corner and die, wouldn't you, if we didn't?" Kitty laughed.

"Believe I would," Miss Bateson answered; "and if you didn't like the trotting pony either, why I'd want two corners to die in. Tell you what"—she put her hands on Kitty's lap—"it's just lovely to be talking nonsense, driving along with you two and thinking that you're going home with me; why, it's one of the things we'll remember as long as we live—it's like your coming down to see me off at the landing-stage."

Before they had been two minutes in the house Harry bounded upstairs. The drawing-room had at last come by its own and been taken into daily use.

"To think I didn't meet you!" he exclaimed. "I simply couldn't get off; I worried the telegraph office all day——"

"Miss Bateson told me."

"She isn't on the telephone yet, or I'd have taken it out of that; and Detner is fidgeting about some foreign complication—it had to be settled to-day. Where is Miss Bateson?"

"Why, she is here," that lady said, coming through the open door. "Mr. Kerriston, it's lovely to see you—you may recollect we met for two minutes on the landing-stage."

"I should think I did. How about the insurance coupons?"

"They were wasted," she answered in a tone that was almost regretful; "but next time I go away I'll try again."

Then the inevitable tea, as Lady Burfield would have called it, appeared, Miss Bateson sat down to the little table and smiled at her guests; for the first time she was absolutely satisfied in her home. Mrs. Roberts and Kitty seemed to be in their rightful place; they were still in their travelling clothes, but they looked their best—they always did that to her—and she was filled with delight in feeling that now for certain they were her friends.

She looked up at Harry. She had seen him on the morning he arrived at Cannero; but only spoken to him under circumstances when a cool judgment would have been difficult. He was just as good-looking as she had taken him to be, and there seemed to be a reserve of force behind the kind eyes and the voice that was as measured and as cultured as his father's, but with more suggestion of human knowledge and tolerance in its tones. She didn't wonder that he and Kitty had fallen in love with each other. Nevertheless the scent of a coming battle was in her nostrils; and something told her that it would have to do with the hesitation Mr. Saxton had shown in speaking of Levanto.

"Mr. Saxton's in London," she said, turning to Kitty. "I believe he came up just on purpose to see you."

"It's awfully kind of him;" but no one understood what prompted Harry to say this.

"He's a very kind man," Miss Bateson answered, pronouncing a criticism as usual on her friends. "I asked him to dine; he didn't accept, but he's to look in for a few minutes this afternoon: I expect he'll be here directly. He wants to take us all to a theatre one night, or do something anyway that will please you."

He came five minutes later. The colour mounted to his face as he entered; for he had not seen Kitty since her engagement, though he had congratulated her in the little note to Cannero. He spoke to Mrs. Roberts first. He looked at her curiously, furtively; there was a difference in his manner, his voice was more sympathetic, an expression in his eyes seemed to convey that he understood, as he had not done before, her sadness and aloofness. Then he turned to Kitty. She, too, found a difference in him, or perhaps she saw him by the light that had come over her own life; it told her that he might be heavy and slow, but that he cared for her very much.

"I saw you at the hotel," he said to Harry, as they shook hands, "but I didn't know I should have to congratulate you. Kitty hadn't told me anything. I suppose I may call her Kitty still?"

"Why, yes, dear Mr. Saxton, of course—you must; you are such an old friend—and you taught me all sorts of things," she answered, and thought of the walks long ago when his conversation was highly instructive and she had tried to understand it. The remembrance of those days made it seem still more strange that he should have thought of marrying her. "Mother and I want to hear about your Shelley pilgrimage," she told him when he had been given tea

and sat by the table looking ponderous, just as he always did.

"There isn't much to tell," he answered.

They knew how difficult it was to draw him out and persevered.

"Did you go to Viareggio?"

"Yes. It's an awful hole; but I saw the Carrara mountains." He looked at Miss Bateson.

"They are wonderful," she said, as if he had bidden her.

"They've got a bust of Shelley, an untidy pine forest, and a wonderful beach—covered with horrible wooden erections. I was glad to come away."

"But where else did you go?" Kitty asked.

He hesitated a moment before he answered: "I went to one or two small places."

"To Sestri Levante?"

"Yes."

Miss Bateson noticed that Mrs. Roberts put one hand over the other and sat very still.

"Mr. Godstone is there," Kitty said.

"He was away."

"Do you know him?" Mrs. Roberts almost forced herself to ask.

"He was a Fellow of All Souls, and at one time I suppose every one knew him at Oxford," Mr. Saxton answered evasively.

"I think my father did long ago," Harry remarked.

"Every one knows him by name, of course," Kitty said; "he is a great savant, but he's very old now—isn't he, mother? Did you go to Levanto, Mr. Saxton?"

"Yes."

"Oh, did you go to the Hôtel Nazionale and see the frescoes in the salon?"

"Yes." His tone was quite indifferent.

Perhaps he would tell them about the portrait now, Miss Bateson thought. But he made no mention of it.

"There are better ones at Luino," was all he said. "I only stayed a few hours; I heard that Godstone was at Levanto, but he wasn't. I didn't see him at all. He changed the subject rather abruptly. "I want you all to come to a play one night. Has Kitty ever seen one?"

"Never. I should love it. How kind you are," she said eagerly.

He looked pleased; he appeared to have got over his disappointment, or perhaps, in his singleness of heart, he put himself aside and rejoiced to see her so evidently happy. "I don't suppose you want to come to Somersetshire just yet?" he suggested.

"Well, there's a good deal to do first," Miss Bateson answered for her. "You see we have got to show her things here in London; she doesn't know any of them yet."

"A little country cousin," Harry whispered.

But the gibe missed fire; it was so good to hear his voice, it didn't matter what he called her.

"I don't know whether she expects me to give any parties," Miss Bateson said.

"Parties?" Kitty leant forward eagerly; excitements seemed to be piling up. "Why should I? I don't know anything about them."

Miss Bateson turned to Harry. "Isn't it lovely?"

she laughed; "I declare she might have been just christened."

"But I want to know everything," Kitty went on. "At Cannero we were only getting ready to live; now we are going to begin—mother too, for all those years she was just waiting till we came to England together. Weren't you, dearest?" She turned to Mrs. Roberts and looked at her lovingly. "Though I don't believe you knew how beautiful England was."

Mr. Saxton took some cake. "She's going to lose you," he said.

"She never will," Harry put in quickly. "She's only going to get me as well."

Mr. Saxton felt that this charming youth did things that he could never have managed—little tender ones for which he would not have had courage.

"Do tell me about parties," Kitty said; "people give a good many in London, don't they?"

"They do," Miss Bateson answered; "first at one house and then another."

"And do you?"

"No, but I'd like to give one for you and take you round to others." She stopped a minute before she went on. "I gave three or four when I first came to this house. I didn't know any people at first, but I met them somehow—one does—and I wanted to get friends, so I just invited every one who would come, and thought I'd sort them out afterwards—clever and smart people, people who were talked about or were nice to look at, just anything that took my fancy for the moment. It was wonderful how they came. I was afraid they wouldn't, but they did. They didn't seem

to mind a bit because I was American, or not clever, or anything of that sort."

"It was very kind of you to ask them," Harry said politely.

"Why, no. I wanted to know what they were like. But you never get at people in London—that is, not at parties; and perhaps they wanted to see what I was like, though they'll go anywhere if the house is in a right position, and the food isn't bad, and some one has told them they ought to go."

"And did you get friends?"

She shook her head. "Not one. I don't believe friendship grows that way. First I was amused; then I just ached before they came, and went to bed after they had gone and felt as if I had had dinner off chopped straw."

"What do they do at parties—I mean when they don't dance?" Kitty asked.

"Well, they dress smartly and walk about and talk at the top of their voices for a little while and go on to the next one. If they are hungry or greedy they look about to see if there is any supper. It's wonderful how much some people like supper; they will sit round little tables and look as pleased as if they had reached the goal they had been looking for all day. If there's just a buffet, why they stand about and crowd it for a few minutes; and some of them look as if they were trying to make the best of a bad bargain, or else they'll walk by the door where it is, and go away with their noses in the air to show that they despise food—somehow they always look as if they were glad they'd got it over on the way out. Then they go on to the next place, or perhaps they go home

and think how tired they are and that it wasn't up to much."

Kitty was quite surprised. "But why do people go to parties or give them?" she asked.

"I expect they haven't anything else to do." Miss Bateson put the sing-song tone into her voice.

Mrs. Roberts looked up; this was a new view of her hostess. "I didn't know you could be so cynical," she said.

"I'm not," Miss Bateson answered quickly; "but it is queer the way people go round and round to the same sort of houses and meet the same set of people over and over again. Some drop out and others drop in; some front doors shut quite suddenly—something has happened, but no one cares. Others open wide and people crowd in; or, for some reason, you often can't tell what it is, no one enters at all—till, perhaps, some one tells them it is the right thing to do; then in they go like a flock of sheep. That's London, Kitty dear; it's wonderful—but why people want to be tiring their feet, wearing out their clothes, and wasting their bodies and minds on nothing at all, I can't say. Doesn't even show you are somebody to go anywhere now, the ropes are so easy and every one knows them. I don't mean that any one in the directory can go anywhere, you know," she went on; "you've got to be something in a way, but you needn't be anything that matters, or that you can't reach to be if you try."

"What sorts of things?" Kitty was mystified.

"Well, rich, or good-looking, or chic, or insolent—that's a real good thing to be—or anything else on the outside to identify you by, like a mark on a dog's back. What you are like inside nobody cares or takes the

trouble to find out. Then there are the advertisers."

"The advertisers?"

"Why, yes, they are run after more than anybody else. They're generally the people who have done something shoddy, but they wave a flag on the house-top at the end of a street to show they're there, and hire a brass band—and it's wonderful how excited London gets, crowds to see and hear like anything. A genius who is going to be immortal often lives in a garret or a slum, and he doesn't advertise, so no one cares one bit—he may starve if he likes. After all, I don't wonder some people do it a little; they don't want to starve or to be let alone altogether. They're just human and want to be cared about, and perhaps they get desperate." Miss Bateson couldn't be uncharitable long.

"And you left off giving parties?" Kitty said with a shade of regret.

"Why, yes, when I knew what it all meant, I thought I'd rather die than see them coming upstairs again, so it was about time. Why, I used to wish for a long pole to push them back with the end of it just as hard as I could, one by one, as they came upstairs and think how funny they'd look falling down backwards."

"Why did you invite us to stay with you? I'm afraid we are not very brilliant," Mrs. Roberts asked, just for the sake of the answer she knew beforehand.

There was truth in every line of the little face as she gave it: "You know quite well why I wanted you. Mr. Saxton does too. I've been counting the hours till you came; now I'll dread their going—you and Kitty and Mr. Kerriston—he is to come in and out as much

as he likes, and all your friends. Wish Lady Burfield would come back. I want her to see I've got you—it's mean of me, but I do."

"She was so excited at meeting you."

"So was I, and when I heard Sir George Kerriston's name at the Royal Institution."

"He was delighted," Harry assured her.

"I was frightened at first, for he's got eyes that always see the back of your head as well as your face, but when I mentioned you he looked as sweet as anything."

"He is." Harry never lost an opportunity of standing up for his father.

"He must be pleased about Kitty?"

"Of course he is pleased," Mr. Saxton said, and got up. "I am glad you are not likely to make her too frivolous," he added. "When shall we go to the play—or perhaps she would like the opera? If she makes up her mind and sends me a little note to-morrow, I'll see about it."

"Well," said Miss Bateson, when he had gone, "isn't it a pity that man's soul did not take up with a more lively body? The one it's in won't answer a bit to all the nice things he thinks of, no matter how hard he tugs at the strings from inside. Darragh would say it's just an unlucky environment."

It struck Harry that, like his father, Miss Bateson got hold of a few words and theories and played with them while she waited for a clearer meaning to develop itself.

"Well, now, I think I'll just take Mrs. Roberts up to see her room; daresay you'd like a talk with Kitty," she added, looking at Harry.

"Immensely," he answered, quite frankly. "But I shall have to go in ten minutes if I'm to dine here to-night. I promised the chief I'd be back at six, for half an hour."

They were alone at last. He took her in his arms and kissed her. They laughed and looked at each other and thought, and each knew that the other did, of the Oberalp—the long pull up to it, the vanishing of the vegetation, the bare mountains, the rough auberge where they had drunk coffee out of thick white cups, and the stroll afterwards along the brown pathway patched with white, while the snow and the sunshine and the blue sky were about and above them, and the sweet wind nipped them as it passed. He had looked at her and said: "We'll never let each other go, will we?" There was no undoing all that day meant. Out of it the wonderful hours at Cannero had come and this one in which every one knew that they belonged to each other. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked at her, from her eyes down to the hem of her frock, then rested his face on the top of her dark head.

"I can't believe she's here; it's too good to be true," he said.

"I have been afraid of waking to find it isn't."

"But it is, my darling—it just is. Let's go over there." He hurried her to a seat between the fireplace and the open window. "Oh, it is splendid to think we are really sitting here," he exclaimed. "But I've only got a few minutes to get out something I want to say before you see the governor at dinner. I expect he'll come pretty early; he's awfully set up about you."

"Set up?"

"Thinks I've done a brilliant thing in getting you."

"I feel as if I were not half clever enough for you. I don't know anything about the world and the things that people do in it; and you are going into politics." She had learnt the expression from Sir George at Cannero.

"Things insist on being known as they come along, so it's all right. Now, then," he hesitated a moment, "first tell me again that you are very happy—enormously happy?"

"I'm enormously happy; are you?" He nodded.

"You look older than you did at Cannero." She had seen it as well as Miss Bateson.

"It's only work," he answered; "besides, I was throwing my cap in the air at Cannero—wasn't it a glorious time? Nothing will ever undo that either; it will carry us through all sorts of things. Now there's something else."

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking that you ought to take care of me."

"Take care of you?"

"Well, you needn't open your eyes so wide to do it." He kissed down the lids, and went on in a practical tone which he hoped was a great success. "It's rather a bore being at a loose end in London. I say, stand up for a moment, I want to look at you again. Do you know, madam, that by the time you're five-and-twenty you'll look as haughty as your mother, though in a different way; you would now if it wasn't for the frightened hare-like expression you occasionally put into your eyes. I'm awfully proud of you; I've done

such a good thing for myself in getting you," he said passionately. "And the long and short of it is we ought to get married."

"Get married? Not yet."

"Not to-morrow," he laughed, "but in a couple of months, say; you'll have to do it out of compassion. You can't expect me to live in a beastly little flat in Victoria Street. Besides, I want to begin life."

"I used to feel that—once."

"I told the governor that it wasn't any use waiting——"

"Oh, but mother?"

"She can live with us if you like. I love her."

"She wouldn't."

"Well, anyhow, she can come as much as she chooses. We shall have such a good time, don't you think the sooner we begin it the better? We shall have more to remember fifty years hence."

"Oh, but——"

"We've got to do it, you know; shut your eyes and jump and get it over."

"You speak as if it were a precipice."

"Well, it is; but I'm at the bottom of it, and you are right away up there."

"Up there?"

"That's it; I've felt it this last month in London, going to some of the parties Miss Bateson is so eloquent about. The chief invited me to the Foreign Office the other night, awfully smart women, tiaras, fine frocks, all that—the whole thing seemed unreal, thousands of miles away from the world you looked out upon—and no good. The governor has big ideas about the survival of the fittest; I always thought it rather

rot myself till I saw you both at Cannero—made one think of a Christmas Day hymn in church.”

“I don’t want to be like a hymn,” she said indignantly, and bolted to the other end of the drawing-room.

“You darling thing, I didn’t say you were one, only that you were rather like one at Cannero”—when he had overtaken her. “Look here, let’s stop talking nonsense; are you going to marry me in September—at latest. This is business.”

“I don’t feel sure that you care for me enough,” she answered perversely.

“I care for you—horribly, dreadfully, frightfully.”

She laughed at the “frightfully,” for she remembered the talk on the loggia the day after Mr. Saxton had made his offer. “I don’t think it ought to be quite so soon as September.” Kitty was learning to coquet with her lover.

“I’m sorry for that because I think I shall get married myself then, and of course I should like to marry you——”

“But you wouldn’t marry any one else?” she asked quickly.

He looked at her for a moment and hesitated. “No,” he said, “I wouldn’t and couldn’t marry any one else—not for the whole world and the sun and moon and all the stars thrown in.”

CHAPTER XVII

SIR GEORGE was at his best that evening, and thoroughly content. The visit to Cannero had been a success, and made the world a different place to him. If he had had more ambitious views for Harry, they had not only been put aside but forgotten. Mrs. Roberts, especially, had been a delightful surprise to him; for naturally Harry had said least about her; she had the type of beauty and the cold distinction of manner he admired. And Kitty had charmed him. He had made a point of taking one or two walks with her alone—to Oggebbio and up to “the other country.” The talks on the way brought him to the conclusion that, though she was quite simple and unspoilt, she was precisely the sort of girl he had hoped his son would marry. He looked forward to initiating her into certain phases of English life, and to seeing the pleasure she would take in them. He felt that she was too young as yet to show in what direction any intellectual capacities she had would develop—there was time enough for that; but it was evident that she possessed character and individuality, and that her life had been what he was fond of saying an English girl’s should be—a beautiful page without blot or erasure. He was immensely pleased with Harry for falling in love with her rather than with any of the young women who swarmed to London parties and plays, and seemed to have no object in life but to amuse themselves. In short, he was pleased all round, and applauded, not only the young people, but his own

wisdom and highmindedness in approving of a marriage that was obviously not a worldly one. Moreover, he saw no reason at all why, if they wished it, it should not take place as soon as conveniently possible. No announcement of it had yet been made; he had not even spoken of the engagement to his neighbours at Leafield—they were few and scattered—that could be done after Kitty had paid her first visit to Highwoods.

All this he thought over as he took his way to Miss Bateson's house. He was curious to see Mrs. Roberts and Kitty in their English setting, though he felt confident as to the result. It was a month, more than a month, since he had left Cannero; it was possible that his memory had in a measure flattered them. He remembered that occasionally he had met people abroad, and rashly laid the foundation of an acquaintance that had shown itself to be difficult when transplanted to London; pleasant and presentable away from all contrast and comparison, they had appeared crude and awkward, or proved tiresome, when he attempted to mix them with those he had imagined to be their fellows. But it was impossible that it should be so with Mrs. Roberts and Kitty; the little group of friends he knew them to possess was in itself a sufficient security against any disappointment of that sort. Still he wondered if their charm might not have gathered enhancement from the atmosphere in which he had found them. Living alone so long at Highwoods, for he came but seldom to London—he had only seen Harry of late in vacation time—he had grown sensitive, severe, impatient, demanding in his secret soul, and certain that he would, at any rate, get it from his son, more than perhaps was possible from average humanity. Outwardly sheltering

himself behind a courteous but occasionally testy manner, he saw with disapproval and dislike some of the tendencies of modern life and mentally exaggerated the effect of them—the toleration of vulgarity, the craving for excitement, the excessive love of amusement, the vanishing of many reverences that had existed in his own day. Narrow in some ways, opinionated and unyielding when he conceived an obstinate attitude to be his duty, he was warm hearted and kindly, and concerning material things generous to a fault; an honourable, truthful, upright gentleman, who unconsciously hankered after an ideal standard usually beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. Their failure and his own—he was conscious enough of his own—helped to make him dream of what his son might achieve, given the right conditions.

The right note was struck as soon as Bogey opened the door; something in the dark face assured him that all was well. Miss Bateson's pleasant twang and genuine welcome as he entered the morning-room, where they gathered for dinner, gave him a thrill of pleasure.

"Well, Sir George, I am pleased, and proud, to think that such an interesting occasion is taking place here, in this house."

He looked quickly at the little weather-beaten face and the white teeth between the hard lips. "My dear lady," he answered; "I never see you without deriving fresh pleasure." He turned to Mrs. Roberts, and the idea went swiftly through him, but left no memory, that for a moment there was an expression of fear and entreaty in her eyes. He saw at once that she was thinner and more worn-looking than she had seemed at Cannero; it did not take from her beauty, and he realised that he

would be proud of her as a near connection of his family. This daughter of a foreign chaplain had something about her that many a fashionable London dame would have given all her diamonds to possess; and from another point of view, many a dreamer recognise as akin to his own soul. His face lighted up for Kitty, who was filled with innocent vanity, because of a new frock she was wearing for the first time; she wanted her lover's father to admire it—to admire her.

"My dear child," he said, "I've been longing to see you; how charming you look!" He took her hands in his and kissed her. "I should have gone to meet you, as it is proper one should when a reigning power arrives, but I thought perhaps your mother would rather recover first from the fatigue of the journey—besides it was a privilege that belonged to our hostess."

Then Mrs. Roberts remembered that it was only Miss Bateson, the warm-hearted American woman, who had been on the platform waiting for them. It wasn't Harry's fault that he was not able to be there; he had bounded in a moment after their arrival at the house, brimming over with love and excitement; and this father of his was kindness itself, yet looking back on that first moment when the train stopped, and they stepped into London and the new life, it seemed as if there had been a symbol, a warning of some desolation to come. She shook off the idea as absurd and preposterous; it was the haunting dread of disaster that had suggested it.

"And now, Sir George," broke in Miss Bateson's voice, "I want to present my brother Darragh to you. It's just the strangest thing that he should arrive to-day, for I remember telling you I hadn't any relations except one brother thousands of miles off, and here he is."

"I am delighted to meet him," Sir George said cordially.

"Seems to me that if Elsie hasn't many relations, she's shown considerable skill in collecting friends," Darragh said, unaware of the discussion that had taken place in the drawing-room an hour before. "I didn't know she had attraction or courage enough to gather them so neatly. Why—now—who's this one?" They were standing a little aside.

"That? That's my son," Sir George answered with excusable pride. Harry's eyes sought Kitty for a moment, and then Mrs. Roberts, before he went up to his hostess. "Dear chap," his father thought, "he's thoroughly in love, and I don't wonder at it."

"Well, he's very good looking," Darragh said, "and looks as if he didn't know it; the man who does had better be a codfish. I'll tell you what, Sir George, he's lucky to get that girl. She's beautiful—in soul, too. I'll bet it."

"You'd win," Sir George said with a twinkle in his eye, "they are both—what you say."

He looked round when they were seated, as he had done on his first visit, and thought how agreeable a picture the dining-room made with the shaded light softly falling on the faces against the dark background. Nothing was overdone—the food was perfect, there was not too much, and it was not too ambitious. A bowl of roses was in the centre of the round table; there was no attempt at anything that suggested the *nouveau riche* or betrayed that the hostess had ever known any other manner of life.

"I rather expected," he said, turning to her "that Wendover would have been here to-night. You told me *he had been* to see you."

"I invited him," she answered; "you don't think I missed trying for anything as lovely as that? He couldn't come because he had been invited to dine with what he calls the biggest gun of all."

"Ah! distinctions are hurrying to him; you probably know that we elected him a member of the Athenæum under Rule two the other day?"

"Well, I'd like to know what that means?" Darragh said.

It was duly explained to him.

"It's wonderful how dodgy you are over here," was his comment. "What with a little thing like that now, and your Societies and titles and decorations you manage to give tone and colour to anything remarkable a man does, in a way they can't manage over with us, where a big dinner or a crowd, or a reception by the President is about all we can do. The new cities out yonder have many remarkable characteristics, but are still at the ugly age. They have not learnt how to be picturesque."

"They will, they will," Sir George said consolingly, "but it comes later, with years and ruins."

"That's so. But they've got to accumulate some dust, and mould, and decay, and to go through with a few tragedies. You can't have ruins without them; it's no good trying."

"They have the sky and all the beauty that Nature gives," Mrs. Roberts said, thinking of a blue lake and the mountains that guarded it.

"That's true, but as yet they have only the outlines of civilisation; they've not got the details. It's like an empty house without furniture; besides, when you talk of the beauty of Nature, I expect you mean Italy. Where I have been lately, there's a great deal of nature

in the shape of the human variety; it's covering the ground, but in a very unpicturesque manner." And Darragh, the chance being given, talked through most of the dinner, while the rest listened with fits and starts, or thought of their own affairs, and tried to cover their inattention by small but appropriate interjections.

"And what was your chief impression of the Western cities, Mr. Bateson?" Sir George asked. This was later, in the drawing-room. Kitty and Harry were among the palms in the open conservatory that stretched along the whole of the far end. "I gather that you did not consider them architectural triumphs?"

His manner was a little supercilious. He liked this wild Yankee, as he mentally called him, but he was uncertain whether to sum him up as a windbag or a visionary; his seemingly driftless talk suggested that he was a windbag, but the smile, that had captivated his sister in the morning, and the far-off look in his eyes stamped him as a dreamer. Sir George saw too, just as the sister had seen, that in a strange, indefinite way, Mrs. Roberts and Darragh Bateson had something in common, an intangible sympathy, a remembrance of loneliness and pain perhaps—it was difficult to say what; but it was there, and the feeling it provoked was curiously different. Towards the elementary thinker this elderly gentleman, of many prosperous experiences and intellectual glimmerings that had never developed themselves, felt somewhat patronising; but the other was a beautiful woman, whose whole attitude appealed to him, partly because of her sex, partly because of some impression he could not define, but that filled him with satisfaction, tempered with deference.

"No, I did not," Darragh answered, solemnly shak-

ing his head. "But they've not had time to think of decorating themselves; that sort of thing comes late—afternoon or evening. They're at the busiest time of life, the eleven o'clock of their day of existence. They don't know what they're setting out for yet; but they mean to make money to pay their way, wherever it is. And they're doing it—they're doing it."

"And what will it come to, do you imagine."

"Come to? Why, chiefly this, that many of us are intent on improving the world and bettering humanity; it's what most of us have at heart if we think at all."

"I hope you are not a Socialist."

"No, I'm not, though the new countries have to begin that way, for they have no foundations—they are all on the surface."

"But you don't think it would do for us?"

Darragh shook his head. "England is old; if she tries to cut the capers of youth they'll kill her. Her foundations are deep in the ground; she lives on tradition; and the things that Socialists scoff at are her mainstay. Why, do you think you'd keep your dominions over the seas if you were all Socialists over here? Not you. The colonies like the glamour and romance of thinking they are ruled by a king with a crown on his head, and nobles in the House of Lords, who are descended from the heroes of centuries ago. It mayn't be true—doesn't matter. Once let them think it's done by only the House of Commons and they'll tell you they've men of their own as good—better, for they have the fresh blood of the morning time in their veins—and they'll separate and do their own ruling."

Sir George was quite pleased. "I agree with you,"

he said; "besides, I always imagine Socialism to be fine talk in the beginning, and every man against his fellow in the end. Still, we have got to find some way of curing poverty and discontent."

"I'll tell you what it is," Darragh said eagerly, "you've got to learn how to spend money—we all have—to learn to think of it as a trust, a power that is given us to use, and we've got to use it wisely. It may be spent on beautiful things, on making right conditions for others to work, on putting more happiness into the world, piling it up, one's own included; but it must be done in ways that are not asinine or immoral, and they've all got to be thought out. That way lies the solution of a great deal that is troubling the world just now—the responsibility of money—that's what we have got to learn. But you may be sure of one thing—we are not all going to be alike; some have got to be rich and some poor, for we want all sorts to make up a right country, all sorts of countries to make up a right world. Heaven knew what it was about when it made short and tall, wise and foolish. Inequality is the keynote of creation."

"You seem to have thought a good deal." Sir George's voice was pleasant, but a little quizzical.

"Why, yes, I've thought, for I've suffered; so has Elsie there. We were poor as rats once, and made to feel that the world didn't want us; we didn't know hunger, but we knew cold and what being miserable was—scuttling out of the way because we were always in it. Lucky for us," he added gloomily, "it taught us—well, taught us most we know, forced it on us."

"May I ask if you follow any profession?"

"No. I'm just a seeker."

"A seeker?"

"That's it, for I have money now — half grandfather's. I'm looking round the world to see how it ought to be spent; when I know I'll begin. I'm not saving it up for nothing; I'm learning my lesson, just as Elsie is. She has found out how to get happiness anyway. I want to find some."

"Is it so difficult?" Mrs. Roberts asked.

"I want to love people," he answered simply.

"Don't you?" Kitty asked. She and Harry had drawn near and were listening.

He shook his head. "I'm beginning. I hadn't the right environment; no more had Elsie. We just shuffled along, and now and then reaching out a frightened hand and getting it pushed away. When we were left alone we started out, she in one direction, I in another; and we didn't care much what became of us."

"Oh!" broke from Kitty's lips. This first day in London was opening wide vistas before her.

"It's so, Miss Roberts," Darragh went on. "Gradually I realised that the trees that gave shelter and the flowers that scented the air, and some living things that came trustingly to one's hand, were a part of the world too. I got fellowship with them; but it wasn't enough, so I went to the cities. This was after I'd been through forests and over prairies, seeing the places where grain would be sown, and cattle range and treasure of the unkempt world would be found; and I saw that the strangest, the most interesting, of all living things were human beings, for with them lay responsibility. So far as we can make sure, nothing else has it; it makes some things we do madness and others suicide——"

"Look here, Darragh, you've got to stop," Miss Bateson said. "You're making me feel uncanny."

"Come and talk to us, Mr. Bateson," Kitty said. "I love hearing about far-off places."

Sir George turned to Mrs. Roberts, and managed to manoeuvre her to a conveniently isolated seat. "My dear lady," he said, as he sat down beside her, "would it be convenient to you to give me an audience to-morrow afternoon?"

"Yes." She looked up at him anxiously.

He hastened to reassure her. "I want to discuss the possible date of a great event."

"Must we discuss it immediately."

"We'll wait, if you like, till you are at Highwoods. I understand your reluctance," he went on, with a charm that was his own when he gave his kindly nature play. "You want a little respite from the thought of losing her. But she won't be very far away, and the boy is devoted to you."

"And I to him."

"Suppose we settle the one main fact now, and arrange the details when you come to the country next week?"

"Next week—next week?" she added nervously. "But Miss Bateson——"

"I've been very diplomatic," he answered triumphantly. "She is going to put you through a course of dissipation during the next few days, and I have persuaded her that you will need a rest afterwards. She has promised to let you come to Highwoods at the beginning of next week, if you will consent to do so, and that she and her—her—curious brother will come

down for the week-end, and bring you back here on the Monday."

"I see."

"I understand that he only arrived to-day; perhaps they will like a little time together to discuss family matters."

"Yes; I ought to have thought of it."

"There's a possibility of Lord Detner going to Paris next week, so that Harry would be free for a few days, which is another reason for your coming then; and I hope that my sister Elizabeth, from Scotland, will be with us. She is most anxious to make your acquaintance and Kitty's."

"She wrote Kitty a very kind letter." The white hands folded over each other as they had done at tea-time; she was thinking what courage it would need to go through with this coming week, these coming months.

"She's a most kind woman, and longing to see you both. May I take it that you will be so kind as to come to us?"

"I think it would be delightful." It had to be said.

"Ah! Then, now, I will put the great petition before you—that you will allow our children to get married this summer? The details we will settle at Highwoods; but is there any reason why it should not take place in a couple of months at most, which will bring us to the end of August—or, say, the beginning of September."

For a moment she could not speak, a choking sensation was in her throat.

Sir George, misunderstanding her hesitation, put his hands on hers for a moment. "It will be a wrench for

you," he said; "but all the great changes, even those that make for our happiness, have a wrench hidden somewhere. We are never let off too easily; you will be compensated with the knowledge of your child's happiness."

"I want it more than anything else in the world," she answered; "it will be my happiness too. And they will have more to remember in years to come."

"That is precisely what Harry argued. Then it is settled—you agree?"

"Yes." She looked up and smiled at him.

He made a little sympathetic sound.

Probably she felt the parting ahead, though she would not own it; that was why she had grown so thin—the pathetic look in her eyes betrayed her. Then he thought of another possible reason that might account for the change in her.

"I'm afraid you've had a great deal of fatigue lately," he said, "and have felt leaving that charming home at Cannero and your most agreeable aunt, whose acquaintance it gave me great pleasure to renew." It was a very Sir-George-like speech; it chased the gravity from her eyes, and put a smile in them to match the one on her lips. He saw it and was charmed; she moved her head, and the light from the little scone above them caught the gold on her hair. He told himself again that she was a beautiful woman, and, but for the fact that she had a grown-up daughter, might pass for a young one still.

"No, I am not fatigued. Aunt Robin went off very gaily to join Uncle James at a mountain place. The unmaking of the villa was tragic; but we were very happy coming to England." He gave a nod of approval.

"And you can't think how gay we were in Paris—we bought clothes and were very frivolous."

"Do I see the result of some of the frivolities to-night?" he asked, looking down at the dress she wore: it was the colour of a dove's breast.

She nodded. "And Kitty's too; don't you think she looks sweet in her soft white?"

He liked the question; there were some vanities, he thought, women should always show. "I think Kitty is adorable in anything," he answered fervently. He looked across the room at her, slim and graceful, her eyes lighted with happiness, her cheeks flushed, her perfectly-poised head with the soft dark hair twisted round it raised a little, as she stood listening to an argument between Darragh and her lover. Now and then she put in her word; then, evidently under persuasion and in answer to some argument, she turned to the piano behind her and sang two lines of the German translation of a Polish song. Sir George went over to her.

"My dear," the words almost conveyed a caress, "I didn't know this was one of your accomplishments. Won't you sing something to us?"

She looked frightened at first. "My voice is not bigger than a fly's," she said, "but I will, if you like." Without more ado she sang the song through in low, soft tones; after the first few words she seemed to lose herself in the tragedy of the race to which it belonged.

"I've often heard of the Polish folk songs," he said. "Do you know any more of them?"

"Yes, but they're all sad," she answered; "and I don't want to remember sadness to-night."

"Don't—don't, my dear," he answered quickly; "and you shall never know it if we can help it." It was

wonderful how completely he always identified himself with his son's life. "Sing me something else—some song you like yourself."

She hesitated a moment, then sang dreamily and quite simply a beautiful but hackneyed one by Brahms. Sir George remembered hearing Mrs. Wrenford sing it, the practised pathos she put into her voice, the sigh at a given point, the upward look of her eyes—all very telling when you didn't see through it; but this dear girl had no tricks—thank God, no tricks at all.

"They are delightful people," Sir George said, as he and Harry walked away from the house; "and, my dear boy, your fate is sealed, a couple of months' run and that is all."

"It seems like setting out to sail round the universe with the sun shining and a fair wind blowing."

"Fine talk, dear chap; I used to do it too—I remember as well as possible—I suppose it's a phase we all go through."

"What do you think of the American brother?"

"A good chap—talks nonsense of course. I don't expect he'll ever do anything; he is one of the indefinite thinkers who never arrive at anything, and have capacity for rather picturesque talk that means nothing."

"But he'll set others thinking."

"Perhaps that's the use of him, that and the circulation of his money."

"There's a good deal in what he said about cultivating a sense of the responsibility of money. He may have hit on a real clue, but I can't think it out now; what with Detner's work and Kitty's arrival I have no head for anything else——"

"Wait, my dear boy, wait," his father answered with

quick kindness. "Get married and set your house in order—that's enough for you at present. By the way, I hear that Saxton called on them this afternoon."

"Oh, yes—wants to take us to a play or something. I say, didn't you know Godstone?"

"Godstone—Edward Godstone? I did years ago at Oxford when I was an undergraduate, but he was a Don and a great swell—he knew my people. Why?"

"Saxton was speaking of him; and Mrs. Roberts knows him. I think she said he was at Sestri Levante."

"He's somewhere along that coast, I know. I haven't seen him for years."

CHAPTER XVIII

Mrs. ROBERTS and Kitty did not go to Highwoods so soon as Sir George had hoped or Miss Bateson promised. Wendover's accounts of his travels, delivered to the Geographical Society, came in the way. Naturally they wanted to hear it. It was to be a great gathering, and Sir George agreed that it would be better to wait till it was over rather than to come up for it. Mrs. Roberts was glad of the delay. She dreaded the visit; and as Sir George developed more and more kindness towards them, she hated herself for not having been straightforward with him. It had been chiefly Lady Burfield's doing, but it was herself she blamed. The knowledge of it had eaten into her life, into her soul, during the last few weeks. It accounted for her thinness, for the worn look on her face, for everything. She felt humiliated in her child's presence, though it was for her that it had been done—and now could not be undone. "It is only the price that has to be paid," she told herself again and again; but she found it hard to pay. She made up her mind that once the barrier was past, the marriage effected, she would take her punishment; she would do penance by going away, and try to find peace and comfort in brooding over the happiness she had not prevented. She felt that, even though they did not know the deception she had practised, it would be difficult to bear the unconscious reproach of their presence. The marriage, she hoped, would end all her fears of discovery. The three people in the world—Lady Burfield, Francis Wendover, and Mr. Godstore—who knew her

identity would be silent. There was nothing to betray it. In the future no one would be able to connect Harry Kerriston's wife with a sensational case of seventeen years ago.

They had been put through their course of dissipation—she and Kitty—during the few days they had been in England. A theatre, and then Mr. Saxton's treat, which had taken the form of dinner at Claridge's, and stalls at the opera—a wild dissipation for the quiet country gentleman. He had considered solemnly whether there should be a development afterwards in the form of supper at the Carlton or the Savoy, but had shaken his head. It would be a pity to make Kitty frivolous, he thought: supper at a restaurant might start her in that direction. Miss Bateson had managed to take her to a couple of dances. The Detners, who had duly called on Mrs. Roberts, asked them to another; and Miss Bateson, not to be left behind, had given a highly successful dinner-party of her own. Altogether the days had been full and the nights crowded with new experiences and excitements. Kitty developed quickly; more during those first ten days in London than she had done during years spent in the quiet places she had previously known. And Mrs. Roberts, who saw this side of life for the first time, put aside her fears and tried hard to give herself up to the spell of London, and, as far as might be, of all that it offered. There was one difficult hour for her—the first she had alone with Wendover in England. He had called two or three times, with an air of doing it because it was expected of him rather than for the pleasure of it, and his manner was different, more distant, and restrained. He avoided looking at her. There were moments when she felt that

he reluctantly despised her. It hurt her as much as anything could outside her anxiety to see Kitty placed for ever beyond all reach of reproach or discovery—for that she was desperate, more and more. Yet day and night her silence to Sir George preyed upon her; not for a single hour did she forget it: a heavy load, yet one she could not cast off save at a price she dared not risk.

This was why she shirked many things that would have been a pleasure under other conditions. Kitty, who, of course, never dreamt of any fresh cause for gravity or unhappiness, put down the haunted look on her face to the stirring of recollections, of old associations, now that she had come back to the country in which she had suffered the keenest sorrow of her life. She explained this to Miss Bateson and Darragh, who were waiting to take her out one afternoon. Her mother had excused herself.

"She ought to go and see the new countries," Darragh said. "She and Elsie must come and see me next winter out in Florida."

"Are you going away, Darragh?" his sister asked. It was the first hint he had given of it.

"Think so, Elsie. Here's Mrs. Roberts." He repeated what he had said to her.

"But why are you going back so soon?" she asked.

"I've seen—I've been seeing a long time now. I want to do—to think how I'll begin. It's about time I did—I have been no use to the world yet——"

She looked up quickly, as if, to use Harry's expression, he had given her a clue. "Teach me to 'do,'" she said. "Help me to be of use. I have done nothing yet—nothing—been of no use in the world."

"Why, Mrs. Roberts," he said, "you have been doing a woman's real work—making Miss Kitty ready. That is what mothers have to do—to arm their children for the future, and set them on the road. It's the holiest work of all—better than what your Crusaders did far down behind the Middle Ages, for they only left the dead or conquered behind them."

She looked up at him bewildered. Harry had repeated his father's words—"windbag and dreamer." They seemed harsh, even cruel; for on the long thin face and in the wide eyes there was the expression that only comes to those who have groped through long lonely hours seeking some solution of mysteries and know it to be coming, just as one knows when wheels are coming along a dark road that is near, though what they carry there is no sign to tell.

Darragh had made her restless and set her thinking; perhaps he had even shown her the way to the future when Kitty's happiness was assured. "Dreamer and windbag?—I have been worse," she said to herself when they had gone and she sat in the drawing-room alone. "A dreamer always. Dreams—dreams—what do they come to? Nothing—nothing. I will learn 'to do'—to help. If only I didn't feel so stifled and bound, so dragged and held down. But when Kitty is safe I will find some work—some good to do. Oh, dear Heaven, help me; give me my child's safety and happiness, and then let me go, and teach me to be of use."

The high mood passed. She crossed the room, stopping to touch some roses massed together in a bowl, and stood by the window to watch the carriages driving across the square, and all the signs of life. "Oh! it is good to live! The sense of it—I love it!" But again

the longing beset her. "If I could only be one of the crew of this great ship we call the world, and not merely one of its useless passengers," she thought with a long sigh; then answered herself back that the crew needed the passengers, that but for the passengers there would be no necessity for the crew. In all things there had been some great design. "It is too difficult and complicated for an average intellect to understand," she thought despairingly.

The door opened, and Wendover entered, awkward and hesitating.

"They told me you were alone?" he said.

"Yes—alone." She felt almost like a criminal before him, as if she had fallen low in his estimation. He stalked in. She pulled herself together while they sat and talked somewhat distantly for a quarter of an hour—of their doings and gaities, of his coming discourse and the rush for places to hear it.

Then, as if he were half sorry for him, he asked:

"And how is the poor old buffalo?"

"He's quite well, and not in the least like a buffalo."

He gave a grunt. "He will be if he finds you out."

"He won't find me out."

But he only gave another grunt, and was silent.

"I believe you are as angry with me now as you were at Cannero," she said.

"Angry with you? What's the use of my being angry or pleased? It's all the same; doesn't make you turn a hair."

"It won't in this matter—I'm going through with it." Her voice was sweet but obstinate.

He walked across the room and back again, as he always did if he were considering a difficult point. "I

never understood your sex," he said. "A man has a sense of honour, or he hasn't. If a woman has one she seems to think she can play with it as a cat does with a mouse."

She flared for a moment. "You've no right to say that to me. What I am doing has cost me enough. It's not for my own sake, but for Kitty's, as I told you." She stopped for a moment, and recovered her calmness before she went on. "Mr. Godstone knows. He said I was right to be silent. I suffer for it, but no one else—and I choose to suffer. I am saving Kitty from knowledge that would change the whole world for her."

"You mean well, I know," he said grudgingly. "The number of crimes that have been committed with that excuse——"

"It is not a crime."

"Burning a heretic wasn't, from one point of view, but a long-sighted charity, if it prevented the devil—who would have made it a much longer business—from doing it."

"This is beside the question—which we argued out at Cannero—and I prefer to leave it alone now," she said haughtily.

He looked at her curiously. "Well, anyhow, I'm glad you have a temper; it's another good sign."

She made no answer for a moment; then a little smile came to her eyes. "You have horrible manners," she said, "and we'd better change the subject. What do you think of Miss Bateson?"

"I like her; she's genuine humanity. Did she tell you that I came one afternoon and stayed two blessed hours? We talked of everything we knew, and she showed me all over the house. She evidently didn't

know what to do with it till you were coming. She doesn't want this sort of place and several waggon loads of furniture."

"She's the sort of woman you ought to marry."

He stopped quickly in front of her. "What do you take me for?"

But she made no answer.

"Shall I tell you what I take you for."

"What?" she asked meekly. The smile was still in her eyes.

"A blithering idiot." His voice melted into tenderness over the words.

"Oh! I only thought——"

"Well, don't think again. When are you going to Highwoods?"

"On Wednesday. We are waiting to hear you talk on Tuesday night."

"The buffalo has invited me for a week-end."

"Have you accepted?"

"Not I. I know something that he ought to know, and am holding my tongue; while I do I'm not going to eat his salt."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense, Francis," she said wearily. The sound of his Christian name pacified him. She had not called him by it six times in all the years he had known her. "It would help me so if you were there. I'm afraid of going—dread it. I want you to come." She looked up entreatingly.

His fine resolution was forgotten in a moment. "I have a motor," he said. "Did you know. Perhaps I'll run down on Sunday afternoon for a couple of hours, and see how the land lies. I expect you'll all go to church on Sunday morning like high-toned Christians."

He took another turn round the room, while she thought it was rather like being in a cage with a tiger, who exercised his growl, but mercifully refrained from using his claws. "You seem afraid of the buffalo?" he said.

"I am." She gave a little shiver. "Perhaps it's the first impression at Cannero. I felt he could be harsh and cold and unyielding. It's in his voice, in his eyes—they are so keen and quick, they see everything. And yet he is kindness itself if he approves of you, likes you—generous, even tender. You should see him look at Kitty. He tries all he knows to give her pleasure. But he's stern—stern. I saw him look at a woman at the Detner's the other night whom he evidently thought improperly dressed and frivolous——"

"Prides himself on being a fine and inflexible moralist, eh?"

She nodded. "Yet he can do pretty things. He sent me all those roses this morning, to remind me of Cannero." She looked towards the writing-table.

"Perhaps he is falling in love with you—even buffaloes can do it. It would be a pretty complication. He might as well fall in love with a frosted saint, if he did but know it." To which there was no answer. "What is so strange to me is that you don't seem to grasp the fact that it is the boy who is going to marry Kitty, not the buffalo," he went on. "That's why your obstinacy, to say nothing of your immorality, is so unnecessary."

She was glad to hear a laugh rumbling in his throat once more; and none of his grunts or growls was offensive, nor any of his abuse; she knew well enough what was behind it all.

"But Harry is devoted to his father," she answered.

"It might break up the whole relationship. There would be no forgiveness——"

"Harry would stick to Kitty?"

"I don't know," she said with a little thrill. "He adores her, but he has inherited his father's strong feelings about some things."

"H'm! It's a pretty kettle of fish all the way round, it seems to me. And I'll tell you what is adding to it. That wild brother of Miss Bateson's is falling in love with her."

"I've seen it the last few days."

"He, of course, wouldn't care a tinker's curse if most of her relations had been hanged and the rest of them were doing time—would probably think that it might put a little variety into a virtuous lady's descendants."

"She's not likely to fall in love with him."

"No; I should say she has a good deal of the maternal perversity, and would maintain herself obstinately in the most inconvenient position that offered." Having relieved his mind of a few more sentiments, he departed.

Wendover was quite right, Darragh Bateson was falling in love with Kitty. He knew that nothing would come of it, but this hardly troubled him. It was the love of a visionary, and hardly tinged with human passion; love of her grace and youth and innocence, of the haunting memories of beautiful places that evidently possessed her, even while she enjoyed all the new experiences of her present surroundings, of her beauty in its highest and purest sense, her divine pity, as it seemed to him, for those who had no share of happiness.

For in the ten days since she had arrived in London

she had seen, not only that side of it where money is spent, and the best sort of social life carried on, but the poorer streets and the tired, hungry people who paced them. It had changed her outlook on life, and had put something into her eyes akin to that her mother saw on the day she came from Andermatt with the wonderful secret in her heart. For have not all the high emotions affinity? Do they not form a great brotherhood in that indefinable world we unconsciously seek in the silence of our own souls, or that is reached by the longing in our hearts.

In the morning, immediately after breakfast—to breakfast sometimes—Harry came, and they wandered about the park and Kensington Gardens together, making plans for the future, day-dreaming, talking as lovers talk. Before ten days had passed she knew every point from which the greenness looked best, the distances and little slopes seen between the trees, the long vista from the Marble Arch and Hyde Park corner, the flower beds and palm growths beside the roadway—they made her think of Italy: she sent it messages in her thoughts as they walked by them. Sometimes they drove along in the governess-cart with the trotting pony round by the Serpentine where the ducks are, and she was enchanted—it was all so new; or they went across in the ferry-boat and back again for the pleasure of it; once or twice in the early morning they hired a boat—the water was still and clear, the trees drooped over the shore, there were flowers here and there down to its edge; it might have been hundreds of miles away. And there was the bridge over the Serpentine. She knew it well now—in the morning with the sunshine on it, or the evening with the long thin shadows stretch-

ing away towards Piccadilly—and the vague depths of greenery beyond the still water on the opposite side of the bridge were lovely, too; and there was the gate and the little descent leading to where the peacocks strut; and the great trees, green and well-content, that somehow had more majesty in them than any she remembered in other lands; perhaps because the chilly winds and rain with which every English summer is tempered, gave them, not only sedateness, but remembrance and dread of winter, and put life of a different quality into them from the one that unfailing sunshine gives.

"Oh, it's wonderful, this park," she said, "and this bridge—I shall see it always in my thought, just as I do 'the other country.'"

It was Harry who took her first—with the trotting pony that Miss Bateson had so thoughtfully provided—

"We'll do heaps of things when we are married," he said in a happy, careless voice, to which there was often an undertone of seriousness, "in the way of giving people happiness, at least—that's what I want to do."

"And I too," she answered: it was wonderful to hear him say it—the thing that was in her own heart. "Those people in the poor streets of Westminster looked so hungry and unhappy, so different from the Italian peasants—but they have more sun and air in Italy. I wish we could transplant them all; they wouldn't mind being poor if they had a blue sky over them and saw mountains when they lifted their eyes instead of ugly brick buildings."

"Dearest and simplest," he answered, "happiness isn't only to be found under a blue sky and among

lakes and mountains, but in many other forms. We'll learn them all, and dispense some, at any rate, if we die for it—because we love each other."

"Because we love each other," she repeated.

"In fact, beloved," he remarked, "we'll do all we know and can, without making ourselves into first-class prigs and nuisances."

Two or three times during that wonderful first ten days, while Harry was at his work, Darragh and Kitty were allowed to set off together in various directions. Then long talks went on and wild schemes were discussed that, though they might never take tangible form, enlarged Kitty's outlook by leaps and bounds; but while, to her, all thought led to the future and her life with Harry Kerriston, with Darragh Bateson it was different.

"Sister," he said one afternoon, "I love that girl, she's just lovely"—the old description. "I'd give away every cent I have and go out breaking stones if I might marry her."

"I'm sorry, Darragh. You've come too late, and Harry Kerriston is so nice I couldn't bring myself to wish he hadn't got her."

"I'm not expecting it; I'm just telling you how it is—and I wouldn't miss loving her for all the world—it makes one know more and feel better."

"There's more in giving than in getting," Miss Bateson said, just as she had done to Mr. Saxton at Cannero.

He was silent for a moment, "I'd find the way along if I had her with me."

"May be you'd sit down—just to be happy."

"I might," he answered gloomily.

"I have been thinking about Mrs. Roberts," she said after a pause; "bringing her and Kitty here is the best thing I've done. It's strange, for I don't know their back history, don't know anything about them except what I saw at Cannero—and one thing that I half guess," she added.

"It's wonderful the power mystery has; come to think of it, everything in life and death and eternity after, is built on it; so 'tisn't likely when it hangs on to people like them that it's going to lose it."

"Knows better," she said.

He was silent for a minute, then he went on, "Dare say they have never done anything remarkable and never will, for there's something in them that can't find expression—but it'll communicate itself somehow, you'll see. That girl's husband will do things because he'll want to lay them at her feet; shouldn't be surprised if there are people who build high or go far on the chance of that mother's queer little smile coming down on them at the last. It's just something in them—they don't know they've got it themselves—that's worked on you, sister. It's often that way things get done."

"Believe you are right, Darragh," and so the talk ended.

That was the night of Wendover's discourse, and all London was there to hear.

Harry went with Kitty; Mrs. Roberts, Sir George, Miss Bateson, and her brother were near them. It had been impossible to get seats for the whole party together.

When it was over, Sir George, who had excused himself from returning to Berkeley Square, waited in the

vestibule; he had been separated for the moment by the crowd. Suddenly his arm was touched, and he beheld Mrs. Wrenford.

She was beautifully dressed; the night was sultry, and instead of a cloak she had quantities of chiffon gathered round her. She seemed to be swathed in it till it was like a modern suggestion of Egyptian mummy cloths; through a soft fold at her throat a Maltese cross of flashing diamonds could be seen. His eyes fastened on it for a moment almost with resentment. She looked more attractive than she had done at the Carlton, but more haggard; older and less made up. Her cheek bones showed—they were a little high—and there were lines on her face that, together with the grey streak in her hair and the paleness of her lips, suggested suffering. She looked pleased and excited at seeing Sir George, a wonderful light was in her eyes. She laughed, and all that remained of a dimple showed itself in one cheek. "Won't you speak to me?" she said, her voice was as clear as his, but less cultured—once heard it could never be mistaken.

He turned quickly. "Bless me! I didn't see you. Where were you sitting?"

"I was behind a long way; but, of course, you didn't see me—you were too much occupied."

"I have been wondering what had become of you."

"I've been ill—ever since we last met. I went away—to the east coast and was horribly bored. I nearly wrote and begged you to come down."

"Oh," he answered in his little short manner, "why didn't you?"

"I thought you wouldn't come, dear friend. I had

to solace myself as best I could—with others." She said the last words in a low tone and made her voice pathetic.

His own was brusque when he answered her. "As a matter of fact I've been trying to go and see you, but I've been taken up with—with important matters."

"Ah!" She put on an air of mock jealousy, "With your delightful looking friends of to-night. I only saw the backs of them—such very nice backs. Who are they?"

"Mrs. and Miss Roberts."

"Do I know them?"

"They only came from Italy last week."

"Are they old friends?"

"No," he almost snapped. He disliked being questioned, and she knew it.

But she only laughed, and her eyes flashed and fascinated him against his will. "You have grown so frivolous," she said. "Last time at the Carlton, and now going about with beautiful strangers."

"They're not strangers—or going to be." He put meaning into his words; she caught it up and looked at him curiously, with raised eyebrows.

"Oh!" she said, as if considering what question it would be wise to put.

"When did you come back?" he asked.

"Only yesterday—I was wondering if you would have me at Highwoods? I long to see it again. Some friends of mine are at Oxford. I want to go to them to-morrow. Then there's the horrid cottage being built at Witney to inspect; but I could come on for this week-end if you'd have me—on Friday?" Her voice

was soft and half entreating; he liked that pose—and she knew it.

He hesitated a minute.

"Unless the new friends are coming?"

"They are," he answered, "to-morrow."

"Oh!"

"And my sister—is coming to meet them," he added.

"Dear Lady Culworthy," she said under her breath, "you'll be quite a family gathering and won't want me."

"On the contrary, I should like you to come and meet them." He considered a moment. "Wait till they come out and I'll put you into your cab. Here they are——" and quickly he introduced Mrs. Roberts.

"I'm such an old friend," Mrs. Wrenford said as she held her hands a second longer than was necessary, "an Indian one. I've known him longer than you can possibly have done. Ah, here's dear Harry, with his new friend," as he reluctantly came forward. "You must have been so happy in Italy." Something arrested her in Kitty's face; she looked at it with a wondering expression on her own. "We shall meet at Leafield," she added almost absently. "I am coming while you are there."

"Harry will look after you," Sir George said to Mrs. Roberts, "and I see the Batesons coming. I am going to put Mrs. Wrenford into a cab—she is alone. Good-night—come." He turned away with Mrs. Wrenford: she took his arm as they went out of the doorway."

"Got him this time," Harry said to himself, looking after them.

Miss Bateson had seen them too. "Why——" she

began; but she said no more during the drive from Queen's Hall to Berkeley Square. "I wouldn't have that woman know him if I'd my way," she remarked, as they got out of the carriage.

"Do you call her 'that woman?'" Harry asked with amusement five minutes later, when they were eating their sandwiches.

"I do; but I don't mean anything disagreeable by it; there are some people you call 'that woman' quite naturally."

"Do you know her?"

"No; but I've seen her about—she's one of the people you always see if she's there."

"Where did you meet her?" he asked curiously. "I didn't think she went to many houses—that she didn't care to go, I mean," he added, afraid of being unfair to a woman he disliked.

"Well, I've generally seen her at studios and places of that sort. I think she knows artists, and clever people. Men always crowd around her; some one told me once they just felt stricken when they'd seen her two or three times."

"She's very handsome," Mrs. Roberts said.

"She's beautiful sometimes. I remember seeing her at the New Gallery once. She passed by with a look on her face as if she was looking for some one she'd never find, and had a flush on her face so beautiful you wondered if it was real."

"Was it?" Harry asked, rather amused.

"Yes, it was," she answered; "a real flush is one of the things she's got. A floating scarf was about her shoulders; it seemed to be made of smoke and shaken by the wind, though there wasn't any—she had a trick

of just giving it a swirl. It wasn't possible to help looking at her, and I looked; she sat down by me and seemed relieved, as if I had stopped her on some downward course."

"You do know her, then?"

"She said she had seen me at some one's studio, so she talked; then she suddenly recognised some one and got up and went away. Next time she looked me so straight in the face you would have thought she had never seen me dead or alive before. But I'm cut out in rather a usual pattern, so perhaps she didn't remember."

"She's a person of many moods," Harry said.

"Well, that's a good thing; it keeps you wondering what the next one will be."

"Wonder if she made him see her home;" he was thinking of his father.

As a matter of fact they had only walked a few yards down Portland Place, away from the throng of carriages.

"You won't want me at Highwoods if you have those wonderful creatures with you," she said.

"There will be plenty of room." He hailed a hansom.

She sighed and looked up at him. "I feel as if they were so very interesting to you." He helped her in; she shut the doors and leant over them waiting for his answer.

"They are," he said firmly. "Harry's engaged to that charming girl; they are to be married as soon as possible."

She clapped her hands and laughed for joy; her eyes flashed, he could see them in the lamplight. "Oh, but

how splendid!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me? Dear things, they are both so beautiful and so young. Why didn't you give me a hint? I should like to have said something to them."

He looked pleased. "I couldn't at the moment."

"But mayn't I go and call on them? Do let me." She reached out her hand to him. "Oh, come in—drive me home—and tell me all—all about them. Where are they staying in London?"

He was carried away by her excitement. "They are in Berkeley Square—but you will see them at Highwoods; they are coming to-morrow." He hesitated a moment. "I won't stay now if you don't mind. I am tired; you must come to us—on Friday. Will that suit you?"

She nodded gaily; he gave the outstretched hand a distinct squeeze and looked at her with admiration.

"She's a remarkable woman," he thought, as he walked away. "If one doesn't always approve of her she has her good points, and she's generally amusing. If she had a strong hand over her——" and he nodded. A man is always certain that his hand could be the strong one if he chose.

Mrs. Wrenford leant back in her hansom and laughed softly to herself. "Silly old mole," she thought. "Why couldn't he take me somewhere and give me some supper—I'm horribly hungry. If Harry's young woman lives in Berkeley Square she's probably rich, and the old idiot won't think it an injury to him if he marries again. But I'm not sure that I could stand him, and it would be deadly at Highwoods—I should make faces at him in no time."

CHAPTER XIX

THE sun was shining on the admirably kept gardens of Highwoods. It swept slowly across the lawn on to the little terrace; here and there, fitfully, it darted through the open French windows into the long, old-fashioned, and exceedingly comfortable drawing-room—the sort of room that is only to be found in an English country home. The house itself, white and creeper-grown, stood high on the Charlbury Road, where it rises and overlooks a small dilapidated Oxfordshire village called Leaffield. Leaffield has grey tumble-down cottages with gardens full of wonderful begonias; a church with an Adams spire and many grass-grown graves round it—graves that are so low one could imagine that as their sleep grew sounder the dead had sunk deeper and deeper into the ground; a village green, with an abject-looking pond at one end; a cross put up by the inhabitants as a thanksgiving for escape from cholera many years ago; a cottage post office with a rickety garden gate; a dreary-looking inn or two; and one well-kept dwelling, half-cottage, half-farmhouse, long, low, and whitewashed, with three solemn yew trees in its garden, where middle-aged ladies and wandering parsons were once able to find lodgings in the summer-time. There are no other landmarks worth mentioning. A little way from the village, but still appertaining to it, there are two rows of cottages on the highway, and then one of the gates of Wychwood Forest; for most of it is enclosed now, though Charlbury way

there are driving roads through it between green fences. In the forest, which stretches far away in many directions and touches the edge of the Highwoods ground, lies the fascination of the district, the wonder, the magic and romance. It is very old, the Saxons knew it, the Normans found it where it is, though there was more of it then, since Leafield itself was built on a clearing, and the countless generations who have wandered through it seem to have left happy whisperings to the trees and all the growing things.

In the forest Harry and Kitty spent most of their time during those first glorious days at Highwoods, among the great beeches and oaks, where the shade was deep and still, making a way for themselves through the thick underwood, finding narrow paths guarded by overreaching brambles, looking down green glades that suggested knights and ladies, fairies and elves, goblins and woodcutters all in turn; or wandering over the slopes—there are many in that dear forest, and all of them have shady green above and tangled growths beneath—or staying beside the long, silent pools, hidden in the close-grown depths, while the great silences were only disturbed by the song of bird, the buzz of insect, or the whirring of a wild duck's wing as it skimmed over the water. At one point two paths diverge and by one of them a wide opening is reached, covered by thickly growing ragweed. The trees and bushes make green and overhanging walls to it, as though once it had been some battlefield or trysting-place of nature that had to be guarded and enclosed. In July, when they saw the forest first, the ragweed stood high and was in full bloom, a mass, a sweep of brightest yellow, the colour of the sun. They called it

the Golden Valley. With an air as of blissful interlopers who feared discovery, and feeling as if they had entered some enchanted place, they trod softly the narrow path beside it, between the upstanding ragweed and the underwood covering the feet of the great trees that watched over it. . . . But it is useless to try and describe Wychwood Forest; it is one of the dream places. To see it, and walk in it, is to be slow-footed because of the fresh joy that every minute gives, overhead and underfoot and all about, and reverent and thankful that it exists.

"Somehow, I think 'the other country' knows about it," Kitty said softly, as though she feared to disturb those whose rightful home it was. "Perhaps one's dreams carry messages of one place to another—I mean of the beautiful still places; they must know about each other, one feels that they do."

"You dear foolish thing," her lover answered, but he thought her foolishness better than the wisdom that goes about brushing away romance and down from the wings of Nature.

The first three days at Highwoods brought a spell of happiness and peace to Helen Roberts, and lulled her fears for the moment. Sir George hurried back the morning after Wendover's discourse and met them in the afternoon at the station—Ascot-under-Wychwood—a couple of miles away. He looked radiant and was brisker than ever. A roomy carriage with a pair of fat horses, an old fat coachman, and a middle-aged fat groom waited for them; a farm cart for their luggage. Miss Bateson and her brother had stayed behind. This visit, undertaken to satisfy Sir George, who wanted Kitty to see the place, was only to last a few days, since en-

gagements had been made for the following week that could not well be broken; her mother, too, anxious that it should be swiftly over, had urged that since the marriage was to be hurried on, there were the usual feminine preparations to begin. She feared the opportunities for questions and explanations that the quiet of the country might afford, and dared not wholly believe even yet that all would be well. But oh, the relief of every hour that passed. She felt it while they crawled up from the station that first day of all; for Leaffield stands high above Ascot, as the name of the station implies. Kitty and Harry walked and lingered behind while she and Sir George drove slowly along the road which is said to be the straightest mile in Oxfordshire. A row of poplars looked down from a hanging wood on one side; a flat dull landscape on the other suggested a sweep of icy wind in winter; then suddenly a turn of the road brought them to Leaffield village and everything changed. She recognised a type of home-place that generations of her people must have known. Past the green, and the church—a serene and prayerful atmosphere seemed to linger round it—then to the left and the Charlbury road. A mile further, a rising mile till the village seemed in a valley, and they came to the gate of Highwoods. The house stood back, well hidden among the thick trees. Only its white forehead and a row of windows that looked like dark eyes could be seen from the road; but soon the rest of it gleamed through the trees. Its whiteness, and the creepers that mitigated it, seemed to be rejoicing in the peace and the midsummer sunshine.

Sir George had talked of the neighbourhood all the way, anxious to point out its views and attractions, ex-

plaining the position of the Cotswolds and the distances from one near place to the other.

"I am sorry your visit is so short," he said, "but we must do what we can in the few days. Unfortunately my sister, who arrived yesterday on purpose to make your acquaintance, is an invalid still, so we must go about alone. We will take the young people to Witney; it is only a few miles, and on the way they'll see the ruin of Minster Lovell, one of the many places where the tragedy of the Mistletoe Bough is said to have taken place. Then there is Burford; you have heard of it, no doubt?"

"Oh, yes, I have seen pictures of it."

"Perhaps we might get over to Oxford, though it's rather far for the horses. Let me see, where was your husband? I forget if you told me."

"He was at New College," she answered faintly, wondering if the questions were beginning.

"Ah. We were all at Magdalen. But you'll have plenty of time to go to Oxford later. You will be with us a great deal I hope, and it is better to take things gradually. By the way, Harry tells me that you know Edward Godstone?"

"Yes, I have always known him."

"I never knew him well. He was really before my time; a friend of my father's in fact—belongs to an older generation. But I remember his coming over to Highwoods once when my mother gave a dance—it must be thirty years ago. He was a don then, of course, but he brought a contingent of partners; very acceptable they were, I can assure you."

"I'm sure they were;" she was struggling to be responsive.

"I don't believe I have seen him since. He was essentially a student, and went abroad. Do you know where he is now?"

"He lives at Sestri Levante, but I think he must be away. I have had no answer though I wrote at once to tell him of Kitty's engagement."

"Sestri Levante. Of course, you were in that direction. I forget where precisely you said your father had a chaplaincy. Why, here are the dogs! Hi! down!"

Thank Heaven! Here were the dogs, and for the moment she was safe again from questions. But she shivered as she first set foot on the threshold. This house she felt instinctively was lived in—had been lived in always—by people who were honourable and faced the world without fear; even the old servants, who smiled and looked like trusty friends, were obviously good and true and straight. She looked round the large square hall with frightened eyes. There were oil paintings of no particular account, yellow with time, trophies of sport and a few weapons on the walls, many rugs on the floor, a billiard table in the centre, a wide staircase going upwards at the end beside a stained glass window. A home of upright English gentlepeople she told herself, who were happy and had generations behind them who had never once been made ashamed. Now she had come. She felt as if she brought it desecration. The remembrance of the cruel promise that tied her down and in loving mercy she had kept, had grown and grown in her imagination till sometimes she felt as if she were dishonouring the ground she trod, even the earth she loved so much. She had never realised till lately, never dreamt of all that silence would mean.

Lady Culworthy rose as they entered from a couch near the fireplace in the drawing-room. She had been propped up with muslin-cased pillows; a thin green silk coverlet was thrown on one side. She struggled up from them with difficulty, waving away her brother's offered help. She was thin and fragile-looking, older than he, but she had, fully, the charm that was only very occasional in him, the same air of being absolutely truthful without his alertness, or the manner that was sometimes frightening to those who did not know him well. She held out her hand and looked at Mrs. Roberts for a moment in silence; then as if any lingering anxiety had dropped away, leant towards her and kissed her. "I'm so glad to see you," she said. "My brother has been looking forward so much to your coming." Another long kindly look at the beautiful face that seemed altogether to satisfy her, before with a little impulsive movement she turned to Kitty, whom she folded in her arms, "I have been longing to see you, dear;" then all shyness was at an end.

But her manner made things more difficult for Helen Roberts; she felt her lips close and her whole soul look entreatingly out of her eyes. Half unconsciously, forlornly, she sat down, as if overcome with tiredness. Then with the dogged courage to which she had obstinately clung she wrenched the disturbing memories out of her thoughts and determined to live in the present. The smile that had always been a fascination came to her lips, and peace and comfort, real enough, though they could not be deep-seated, to her heart.

"I think you get very tired now, mother dear," Kitty said anxiously when they were alone.

"No, not tired, but everything is a little new and strange for me too."

"I know," the girl answered, "but we have Harry to help us through and make us happy—he loves you very much, dearest," to which for answer there came only the expression that Kitty knew so well, tender but aloof; and when her mother spoke again it seemed as if her voice came across a distance, just as it used at Cannero.

The first evening was pleasant, even delightful; with talk and questions of Italy and travel on one side, of neighbours and surroundings on the other. Kitty and Harry were in high spirits, and Mrs. Roberts seemed to be under a spell that brought back her youth and beauty from some secret place in which they had been waiting for happiness to call them forth again.

"They are two of the most charming creatures I ever saw," Lady Culworthy said to Sir George. "I wonder why they lived abroad, in places where there couldn't have been much companionship for either of them."

"Scenery I imagine—that dear woman," by which he meant Mrs. Roberts, "seems to think we haven't any in England."

"She tells me they haven't been to England for seventeen years. What were their relations about to let them hide themselves so long?"

"Hide themselves?" Somehow the word worried him. "They didn't do that, and upon my life, I don't think they have any relations, except the Burfields; small families all round. I told Mrs. Roberts I hoped the tradition wouldn't be carried on."

CHAPTER XX

THE next day Lady Culworthy failed to appear. She suffered terribly from neuritis, Sir George explained; the long journey from the north had brought on an attack. There was no help for it, she had to stay in bed till it was over. It made things easier on the whole; naturally there could be none of the intimate talk inevitable between two women thrown together and about to be nearly connected. The visit was to have been a quiet one in any case; Lady Culworthy's illness made it quieter still. The residents usually within reach were still busy with their London season; there were no neighbours to visit except the vicar and his wife—simple folk and gracious—who called and were told of the engagement. Harry and Kitty spent most of their time in the forest, while Mrs. Roberts went walks or drives with Sir George and paid brief visits to Lady Culworthy's darkened room. The long figure on the white bed, the worn face on the high pillows, the dim furniture, the drawn blinds leaving only a foot of open window visible through which masses of green creeper peered, a ticking clock, a scent of roses, a shadowy atmosphere—it all seemed to match the low sympathetic voice and make a harmony, a soft grey background to the time.

"You took the journey because of us," Mrs. Roberts said.

"It's such a comfort to have seen you both," the voice answered on the third day—Friday—the day that Mrs. Wrenford was to come. "It is worth a little

pain—don't you think that some things are, dear Helen?" Lady Culworthy had soon dropped the Mrs. Roberts.

With her head down on the coverlet, and her cheek on the thin hand she was holding, Helen whispered out of her heart, "I know: there are some things one would be burnt alive for—and be thankful for the chance that gave them, even at that price."

"That woman has suffered a silent martyrdom about something," Lady Culworthy said to Sir George.

"I wonder——" he considered a moment. "Poor thing, I understand she was extraordinarily devoted to her husband. Lady Burfield said he was an exceptional man." He moved his throat round two or three times inside his well-starched collar. "We must do what we can to make the future happier for her."

He took her to the forest that morning and saw with delight the joy it gave her. One of the pools was long and narrow; to the little path beside it was a background in which the trees, gathering close and thick, had woven darkness.

"Doesn't it remind you of an Albert Dürer picture?" he asked.

She nodded. "It's so romantic, so old; Albert Dürer seems modern to it." She looked up at him with a smile and grave blue eyes that made him feel as if all the sin imputed to the world was a myth. He saw the contour of her face, as she turned to watch a rabbit scuttle away, and a wild duck clear the water, and he felt vaguely that to be in the midst of this green forest with this fair woman made a picture beyond the power of any painter, an experience so pure and uplifting that it suggested a higher love than any

was born of ordinary human passion. Then he shook his head and thought that he was full of absurd fancies; looked at his watch, pulled himself together and tried to be a little masterful—pleasant but masterful—and to talk with authority of the advantages of the English climate. Suddenly she laughed—a fresh, sweet laugh that took him by surprise—as another rabbit frisked suddenly into the undergrowth. It set him thinking of her girlhood as he imagined it to have been; he wondered what Roberts had been like, and whether the poor fellow had dreaded leaving her.

"I'm glad you like the place," he said, deliberately putting briskness into his speech, "You would find it very bracing in the winter. We must persuade you to pay us a long visit."

"I am going to take a travel-time when the wedding is over," she answered—"a long one. Miss Bateson wants me to do one with her—and her brother—to the other side of the world perhaps."

"Don't you think the brother is somewhat erratic?"

"I like him."

"Yes—yes—but he's elementary; that sums him up." Sir George was rather proud of his definition of Darragh's outlook.

"The elementary things were all so genuine—good and ill alike."

He looked at her again. She was very thin, he thought, and a sudden idea occurred to him. "Was your husband naturally a strong man?" he asked anxiously—he felt it his duty to be anxious.

"Yes, I think so. He had a great reputation as an athlete at Eton."

"Ah! I'll look up his name on the wall next month,

I'm going there. The Provost is a very old friend of mine."

"Yes——" a little shadow passed swiftly over her face; he had seen it come and go before.

"I hope this walk isn't too much for you?" She was a feminine creature in all things, he told himself. How much more charming it was, how much more right, in fact, than the strength and independence of the modern woman who needed nothing from his sex—took what she wanted and inwardly felt superior—which meant that he was glad when a nice woman was sufficiently tired with a long walk to be glad of his arm.

She shook her head. "Oh, no, it is not too much. I could walk for ever in beautiful places, so would Kitty—especially with Harry." She looked up with the smile that enchanted him.

"That girl has every quality that makes her delightful," he said; "I can't tell you how happy I am about their marriage."

"I love you to say it; I shall miss her, but——"

"You needn't miss her more than you choose," he pulled up suddenly and stood facing her. "They will be delighted to have you in London; but I hope they will be here a good deal—that you will too." He stopped for a moment, his voice became a little husky. "It's only three days since you came——"

"A heavenly three days," she said gratefully.

"I am almost afraid to tell you what it has been to me—to see you and Kitty about the place—come as often as you will—stay as long as you can——"

A look of wonderment on her face arrested him. He realised that he was on the brink of saying more

than he had intended or wished; for a moment he stood awkward and speechless. He was open to sudden influences; sometimes on a quick analysis he felt he might succumb to them, as he had done to Miss Bateson at the Royal Institution; but he had no sympathy with what he would have described as meandering principles; even when he felt that he might be carried away by a situation, he was alive to its awkward possibilities and held himself in check.

She was surprised and relieved at his abrupt silence; unconsciously she played up to his change of front. "It must be getting late," she said, "and Lady Culworthy is coming down this afternoon."

"Quite right; we must go. By the way, did I tell you that I had heard from Wendover; he hopes to motor himself down on Sunday afternoon."

"I'm very glad. I want him to come." Something in her tone made him uneasy, but of course she had known Wendover for years; naturally she would like him to see Kitty's future home.

He thought about it again that afternoon as he stood on the terrace with Harry. The soft murmur of talk went on in the drawing-room behind them. He listened to it with a smile; presently he put his arm in his son's and strolled a few steps away. "What a charming woman Mrs. Roberts is," he said, and inclined his head back towards the house.

"I know. I loved her the moment I saw her."

"Quite right—always look at a girl's mother—I made a point of it myself."

"I'm certain you did."

"It makes the whole thing so safe, gives you an inkling what the girl herself will be by-and-by, though

Kitty doesn't take after her mother. They seem to like being here."

"They love it—they're as happy as anything—so am I."

"So am I," Sir George answered gaily. He waited a moment. "Do you think Wendover's fond of her," he asked suddenly—"of Mrs. Roberts, I mean."

"Fond?" Harry looked at his father in surprise. "Oh, they're just old friends—that's all."

"Humph! She is the sort of woman with whom it's difficult to remain old friends if you see her very often, at least I should say so; but perhaps he knows it's that—or nothing. A woman's old friend is often a muzzled lover."

"I shouldn't think that sort of thing is much in his line—awfully good chap though."

Sir George thought for a minute. "Well, at any rate she has probably gone past the dangerous point with him, if there ever was one. By the way, has she said anything about the actual wedding?"

"How do you mean?"

"Where is it to take place? I suppose Burfield will offer his house, but a doctor's house has always an air of remembering the patients."

"Mrs. Roberts doesn't want a fuss."

"A fuss. No—but Kitty will make a pretty bride. Let's go in and talk to them."

Lady Culworthy was propped up on the sofa, a shawl round her shoulders, soft lace about her head. Sitting near her Helen Roberts, with a little work-bag on her lap, was embroidering green leaves on a bit of blue silk. Beside them was a movable book-stand, with the contents of the last box from the

library, and a small table with the inevitable bowl of roses. About the room, in clear glass vases (no cranky cheap artistic pottery was admitted there) were cut flowers that had an old-time look—geraniums of various shades, fuschsias, and forget-me-nots. The gardener at Highwoods, who had his views about the modern craze of what he call "distorted blooms," had been told that the ladies came from Italy, where the sky was always blue and flowers grew everywhere of their own accord; he wanted to prove that "we know how to do something in England, we do." His master entirely sympathised with his ambitions.

Sir George seated himself and looked round. "Where are those young people?" he asked. They had adroitly slipped away. "Well, never mind; we might settle a few details without them—I mean about the wedding; it's time we thought of it." He turned to Mrs. Roberts, "Harry tells me you want it to be very quiet?"

"That is what we both wish."

"Well—but my boy is going to marry a pretty girl, giving me a charming daughter; I should like to strut a little, like a peacock, and show the world what a lucky fellow I am."

"Of course you would," Lady Culworthy said affectionately—she was devoted to her brother. "And I should, if it's possible; I shall be so proud of my new niece."

"We've lived such a quiet life; the idea of a fuss is frightening," Mrs. Roberts pleaded, and went on with her work.

"Still, it's the right thing to invite any relations one has—outlying cousins, for instance, to whom one

seldom has a chance of being civil. And there are old friends; a wedding is the time to bring them round you again."

"There is no one I want to ask. Sir James will lend us the house, I suppose."

"No friends of years ago—when you were first married, or before?"

"No. I was married in Italy and had lived there all my life."

"But you came to England and saw your husband's people?"

"I never knew his friends—I saw his mother once, but she died before he did. Even Aunt Robin I only saw afterwards."

"Had he no other relations?"

"One brother—who is in Australia."

"Dear me! What a family—all dead or scattered. We must do better in the future." He was thinking of sturdy grandsons.

"We'll do better in the future," she echoed, her eyes still bent on the green leaves her needle was creating.

"And the future shall be better for you," Lady Culworthy said softly, and reached out a hand.

Mrs. Roberts bent her head and touched it with her lips. "You have been very good to us," she answered, in a low voice. "I can never forget it; you know so little about us and—and——" The voice quivered for a moment.

"My dear," Lady Culworthy said, "I feel as if we knew everything."

Oh, that they did, her heart cried out, oh, that they did.

"When is Lady Burfield coming back?" Sir George asked.

"I don't know. I heard from her to-day; they were leaving Murren. She didn't say where they were going next, only that Uncle James wasn't well, and they might stay abroad for a long time."

As a matter of fact Lady Burfield had determined, if it were possible, to keep her husband away till after the wedding. Harry's father had evidently an inquiring disposition. She was afraid of her James being asked tiresome questions which would inevitably be passed on to her to answer, and she remembered uneasily the searching look in Sir George's eyes. Besides, though, like a good many managing women, she rather enjoyed walking round a difficult situation in a manner that in itself constituted an untruth, she objected to telling distinct lies, hence she determined to remain as long as possible securely perched in a comfortable hotel on a mountain where the post was irregular.

Sir George was rather vexed. "Well, if they're abroad, you can't ask their friends, for you probably don't know them, so there'll only be the empty house: worse than ever."

"I must think it over and talk with Kitty," Mrs. Roberts said. Suddenly she looked up, evidently amused—Miss Bateson would probably delight in having the wedding in Berkeley Square, and would provide a certain number of guests after her own promiscuous fashion. "Miss Bateson would lend us the house perhaps?"

"Of course, we were forgetting her." His good-humour returned in a moment. "I feel sure that she

will help us out. We must bring her down here as soon as Elizabeth is better. She is a delightful little woman, sound of body and clean of soul—you'll like her," he added, turning to Lady Culworthy. Having thus delivered himself in a phrase which he considered neat and comprehensive, Sir George rose to go and meet Mrs. Wrenford who was due in three-quarters of an hour.

He returned in two minutes, pleased, perplexed, and laughing. Mrs. Wrenford trailed in after him, a triumphant and arresting sight. A large black straw hat, with pink roses round its crown, shaded her face, a white gauze motor veil was tied under her chin; a long thin cloak slipped from her shoulders as she entered. Sir George picked it up with an air of greater gallantry than he usually displayed. She looked less haggard than she had done the other night and younger, for the hat covered the grey streak in her hair and softened the lines of her face; she was evidently in high spirits, but her manner was a little diffident—and even charming. She looked towards Lady Culworthy, and the pillows and the coverlet that were evidently the adjuncts of an invalid, and made a little sound of sympathy; but she waited for her host to speak, as if she felt that his pleasant excitement must have its way.

"She stopped at the door as I reached it," he explained—"has motored over from Oxford with a youth who is coming in when he has looked to his machine."

"My brother was just going to meet you," Lady Culworthy said. She had not risen for Mrs. Wrenford, but sat looking at her with a little smile, half-

deprecating, half-amused, quite unaware that her manner betrayed a somewhat reluctant welcome.

"I was so afraid you would—you are so careful always to be in time. We hurried—flew along—I couldn't bear to give so much trouble for nothing." Mrs. Wrenford gave a quick comprehensive glance round—it lingered on Mrs. Roberts, she evidently realised that the young people were absent. "It's too beautiful of you to take me in—at such a thrilling time, too. But, dear Lady Culworthy, why—why—this sofa—and that shawl and air of languor?" She dropped on her knees by the sofa and kissed the hand that Mrs. Roberts's lips had touched a few minutes ago.

"A little neuritis, but it won't interfere with George's other guests, I hope."

"Oh, but it's horrid, horrid pain—why does pain always go to the best and dearest?" she asked, in a bewildered voice. "It's very clever of it, of course; it shows what excellent taste it has, but if it would only go to the wicked or the common people—like me—it wouldn't matter at all." She rose and looked at Sir George.

"I don't think it would agree with you," he said. She shook her head and sighed. "Who is the young man with you?" he asked. "One of the many victims?"

"A very young and small one—I'll tell you directly. I must speak to this beautiful lady." She went forward and grasped Mrs. Roberts's hands. "I didn't know the great good news the other night. Sir George hadn't told me—it was too bad of him, but she looks too sweet—I long to know her." She turned to Sir George again, "I've been staying in Oxford with the

Bryans; it is Newsted Bryan who brought me over—you do know his book, don't you? I thought you'd like to see him—and Mrs. Roberts will?"

"Is he the poet who was with you the other night at the Carlton?"

"Oh, no! dear Newsted is not a poet; but he's a wonderful boy."

Then dear Newsted entered. He was, as she had said, young and small, and very fair. Mrs. Wrenford went forward as if to give him courage. "I have told them all about you," she said, "but I didn't know Lady Culworthy was ill or I wouldn't have let you come in."

"Oh, but I'm so sorry," he had a squeaky, sympathetic voice, "I feel sure I am intruding—let me go away. I have—some manners, and I am not unfeeling, I assure you. I have tinkered up the iron beast outside; do let me go." He made a sound like a purr in the treble.

But he was persuaded to stay, and tea was administered, while he and Mrs. Wrenford led the talk to books and pictures and made their tones a little earnest and intense after the manner of people who imagine their tastes to be cultured.

"I understand that you are literary, Mr. Bryan?" Sir George said.

"It's so good of you to say that nice thing to me," Mr. Bryan squirmed with satisfaction, keeping a firm eye on the cup almost he was balancing on his knee, "for I have only written just one little book; but people—dear people—are very kind to it."

"We'll get it from the library," Lady Culworthy said. "What is it called?"

"It's called—must I tell you? It is called *The Creaking Door.*"

"It sounds rather ghostly."

"Oh, no, it's not ghostly; it's human, very human, I fear."

"I have heard of it," Sir George said, darting a keen look at him. "I was told of it the other day."

"Oh, but you're not shocked? It is only about the real things, the actual things of life. I'm not responsible for them. I sit beyond and weep."

Sir George turned away.

"Where is Harry?" Mrs. Wrenford asked quickly, to fill in an awkward pause. "And do tell me what her name is. I must call her by it, for I have known him more than half his lifetime."

"Her name is Kitty," Mrs. Roberts answered.

"Such a dear little name."

"I don't suppose they will be back till five." Sir George looked at his watch; his tone was perfectly polite. "Mr. Bryan, if you are ready, I'll see you to your motor."

"Yes, indeed. I oughtn't to have stayed so long; we are dining early." He rose with alacrity, and looked quite unconscious of dismissal. He made his adieux gracefully in a lingering, sympathetic voice to Lady Culworthy, then smiling, as if pleased and satisfied, went towards the door. His host followed him with alacrity.

Mrs. Wrenford felt that Sir George had to be pacified. "May I go and see if it is really mended," she asked Lady Culworthy, "and if all my little belongings have been taken from its various pockets?"

Mr. Bryan was already in his motor, which had set

up a cheerful grunting. He remained hatless while he spoke to her. "Thank you, thank you," he said, with a little thrill in his voice, "for all the delight your visit gave us. And you will really come back to us on Monday—very early; the motor may fetch you—at what time?"

"At ten." She looked at Sir George, but he made no sign. "No, at eleven; that will give me an hour more in this dear place."

"At eleven, to give you an hour more in this dear place," Mr. Bryan echoed. "Good-bye, Sir George," he was quite unruffled.

"Good-bye," Sir George answered, courteous but brusque. "I regret that I cannot ask you to fetch Mrs. Wrenford on Monday. And you will understand me when I say that your book may be very clever, but it is not one that I should allow to be placed on any list going from this house to the library."

"Oh!—" Mr. Bryan looked amused, but his voice was penitent. He turned to Mrs. Wrenford, "You must make my peace with him," he said. "I am sorry you brought such a black sheep into his white fold, but it's going away." With an effective snort, the motor whirled off.

She looked at Sir George with frightened eyes. "Take me round the garden and scold me before we go in," she pleaded.

He hesitated, and tried to be stern; but the shady hat was becoming, her manner was penitent and womanly; a lurking smile she tried to repress was in the corners of her mouth.

"It is not my business to scold you," he said with his head erect.

"But I want it to be," she answered demurely. "When it is over, I should like five minutes to recover before I go in and behave beautifully." He disapproved of her; but she could be charming, and he felt it.

"A man spoke of that book the other day at the Athenæum; he said it was thoroughly indecent. I don't wish to see its author again."

"Very well, stern man; but please forgive me. The motor is coming for me—without him—on Monday. You are right, quite right, in the abstract. So many things are right in the abstract, but that's all; and the abstract is a little mistaken sometimes; it doesn't always know," she sighed. "His book is a little highly coloured, of course, he is a passionate, powerful creature; but they are so imprudent, so brave and daring, at that age. Don't let's talk about it any more, and don't be angry with me; it's so nice to be here." He smiled and eased his collar; she knew that he was appeased. "Now tell me about Mrs. Roberts and Kitty—I am so glad for you," she added softly. "She is very pretty; she looks too sweet for words—and to be rich too."

"Rich! Who said she was rich?"

"You said she lived in Berkeley Square; no one lives there who is poor."

"They are staying with a friend; it isn't their house. They came from Italy, as I told you, a fortnight ago."

"But where do they live?"

"Abroad."

"And who are they?" she asked, putting her hand on his arm; there was no response, so she took it away again. "You know what an interest I take in every-

thing concerning you. Who is Mrs. Roberts's husband?"

"He is dead. As a matter of fact I know hardly anything about him, except that he was at Eton and afterwards at New College." He looked round—for she made a little abrupt movement before he went on, "he was a nephew of an old friend of mine, Sir James Burfield, the great doctor—no, of his wife's. Mrs. Roberts was a parson's daughter."

"Have you known them long?"

"Never saw either of them till six weeks ago."

"And Harry?"

"He met Kitty last year. Went out and stayed with her and her mother this spring, at a little place on Maggiore."

"The usual mother and daughter," she made her voice a little tired.

"What do you mean?"

"One meets so many charming mothers and daughters abroad—at the *table d'hôte*. I always love to see them."

"He didn't meet them at a *table d'hôte*," he said firmly.

"Of course not.—It's beautiful news," she added softly.

"And Mrs. Roberts is a beautiful woman."

"And fair—I'd give the world to be fair. And I should love you to describe me as a beautiful woman." She turned her head away almost sadly, and winked at the landscape; but her manner was absent and puzzled; she hesitated by a rustic seat, as if about to sit down.

"We must go back," he said. "They will wonder what has become of us."

"Yes, yes, of course they will. Has Kitty any money?"

"No; purely a love match," he answered brusquely.

"How pleased Mrs. Roberts must be. It's such a good match for her girl."

"She's not in the least worldly."

"Every mother is for her daughter," she sighed.

"I understand it—so well."

They were in sight of the house. Sir George quickened his steps; he was beginning to feel angry, or uneasy, he didn't know which—something had gone wrong with the atmosphere in the last half-hour. Suddenly Harry and Kitty appeared—Kitty laughing and happy, with her hat at the back of her head, her dark hair fluffy with the soft wind.

"Ah, here she is," Sir George said, and turned to Mrs. Wrenford. Her face was pale, her eyes had the look of fright that he had seen once or twice in Mrs. Roberts's; but in a moment she recovered.

"It can't be an accident," she said to herself. Then she took Kitty's hands—her own were trembling. "I didn't know the other night. I must tell you how glad I am—for you and this dear boy," she said and looked up at Harry.

She was a nice woman after all, Sir George thought. There had been real emotion in her voice.

CHAPTER XXI

SIR GEORGE was right, the atmosphere of the house had changed. From the moment that Mrs. Wrenford re-entered it after the walk in the garden, there seemed to be an undefined antagonism between her and the new comers; an insolent domination, smiling but unflinching on Mrs. Wrenford's side; a shrinking on Mrs. Roberts's, an instinctive dislike that no soft speeches—they seemed to be laboured and thought out before they were spoken—could allay.

Lady Culworthy retired early. Thus in the evening they were thrown a good deal on each other. Mrs. Roberts, in her soft clinging evening dress—"looking like a saint on her way to be canonised"—Mrs. Wrenford thought contemptuously—sat near a lamp embroidering the bit of blue silk; Kitty and Harry talked by the open window, or took little strolls in the garden and returned; Sir George, half-puzzled, stood on the hearthrug; or moved about occasionally, making some little adjustment as a pretext; Mrs. Wrenford, wonderfully dressed, the Maltese cross at her throat above an enormous cluster of roses fastened in the lace across her bodice, sat a little apart in a half light that made her jewels flash, and curiously surveyed the scene; her voice when she spoke was almost mocking, but she disguised it with laughter that seemed to be forced.

"Do tell me," she said, after a pause, "when the wedding is to be."

"Early in September," Sir George answered.

"You will invite me, won't you? I'm one of the old, old friends of the family."

"It is to be very quiet," Mrs. Roberts said, without raising her eyes from the embroidery.

"Oh——" She opened and shut her rose-coloured fan, and tried to catch the light from the lamp with its spangles. "But Kitty will look so sweet; she ought to have a lovely white satin wedding."

"That's what I say," Sir George put in quickly. "Orange blossoms, bells, favours, all sorts of things."

Kitty's mother hardly seemed to hear—to be lost in a dream; Sir George struggled with the silence that seemed to be insistent, asking stray questions which each woman waited for the other to answer. Mrs. Wrenford generally filled in the pauses; but her thoughts were evidently busy with other matters. When the clock struck ten, Mrs. Roberts got up.

"Do you mind if I go?" she asked. A faint smile struggled to her face; the woman watching her recognised her fascination, and resented it. "Lady Culworthy said I might pay her a little visit." She went slowly from the room.

Mrs. Wrenford's eyes followed her till she vanished. Then she raised the diamond cross from her neck and rested her cheek against it. "Isn't it a lovely jewel?" she said softly, and looked up at Sir George.

"Ah!" he gave her a little smile; but he looked vexed, and turned abruptly towards the window. "My dear Kitty," he said, "do you think we could persuade Mrs. Wrenford to sing to us?"

"He treats her as if she were hostess here already,"

that lady thought disdainfully; but aloud she said, "I will, if you like, though it's only a poor croak now."

Helen read Lady Culworthy to sleep, then sat by the window of her room till midnight looking out at the dark forest. She felt as if a malignant hand had reached out towards her, as if a cruel influence had come into the house—and the end might be delayed, but was certain. "Oh, if I'd told him—if I'd only told him—if I'd only spoken that first day at Cannero," she thought again and again. "It's too late now, too late. There is nothing to be done but to go through with it—nothing to be done," she repeated in the long, sleepless hours of the night.

The morning brought exciting news with it. Lord Detner wrote to ask if Harry would join him in Paris, possibly to go on to Vienna—they would be back within ten days. The request was not one to be refused. It was arranged that he should cross by the night boat on Sunday, leaving Highwoods early in the day, for the trains were slow and few. After all, it wouldn't make much difference, they agreed, for Kitty and her mother were to return to London early on Monday morning; Mrs. Wrenford was going back to Oxford, and Sir George to London, unless Lady Culworthy, who had had a bad night, took a turn for the worse.

The situation showed no improvement as the day went on. Mrs. Roberts isolated herself as much as possible. She saw Mrs. Wrenford's beauty, and her fascination, though she stayed outside it, but her instinct was to keep at a distance. Kitty, who had been

spellbound by her the night before, gradually developed an uneasiness in her presence she did not stay to analyse, but it was there; and Harry had never cared for his father's friend.

"I don't think our ladies get on very well together," Sir George confided to him. "I'm rather sorry that Mrs. Wrenford is here this week-end, but she proposed it herself and I didn't like to refuse." This was in the afternoon.

"She's always very ready to come."

"The air agrees with her—she likes the country. Very accomplished woman, isn't she? And handsome still?"

"Oh, yes—not quite my sort, you know; but that doesn't matter."

"I like to do what I can for her; she's lonely—and—and I didn't like her husband—but that wasn't her fault—I wasn't very agreeable to either of them in his lifetime."

"You feel that you want to make up for it?"

"Well, perhaps that has something to do with it, besides she's a nice woman," he added with a little hesitation. He always felt that something in him tried to be unjust to her. "And her husband behaved very badly to her—left her comparatively badly off; they had some quarrel, I believe."

"Did you know him well?"

"No—they were on our station—and not very popular. She made up to your mother, said she'd known some people we knew in England, and rather insisted on knowing us—afterwards, some years later, I met her in Paris, and she was unhappy." He dropped the subject abruptly. "My dear chap," he went on, and

his face brightened, "I'm going to London on Monday afternoon—I must be here till then or I'd take Mrs. Roberts and Kitty up that morning. I want to see Wilkinson about settlements."

"Sounds like business, doesn't it!" Harry answered, beaming. "You've been splendid all through. She's awfully set up with your present to-day; you are a prize father."

"By the way, I've been wondering how we're going to get you to Charlbury to-morrow; there are no Sunday trains at all from Ascot, you know."

"Kitty and I have a brilliant idea. She wants to see me off to-morrow night. Suppose we sent Wendover a masterly telegram suggesting that he comes over quite early to-morrow and motors us both back in the afternoon? Miss Bateson would give us dinner, convey Kitty to Victoria to see me off, and back when I had gone—I know her. Kitty would only miss one night here, and Mrs. Roberts wouldn't mind a bit going up alone on Monday."

"Sunday, remember," Sir George said in a punctilious voice.

"I know; but Wendover's a born Sabbath-breaker, you can see that, and it is a pity to let a bad example be lost—when it's a pleasant one."

"Humph. You are designing young people."

Harry knew it was all right. "Miss Bateson of course would have a masterly telegram, too. We will drive to Charlbury and send them both, if you agree; we want an excuse to take out the dogcart. Here she is."

Kitty entered with Mrs. Wrenford; they had been in the garden.

Sir George, always won over by the sight of the

girl who had completely taken his fancy, turned to her with the little air that sat delightfully on him. "My dear, I hear that you are two conspirators and want to telegraph to Wendover and Miss Bateson."

"If you will let us." She had discovered already that he would let her do anything she pleased—within limits—if she deferred to him and asked his leave.

"Well—provided your mother doesn't object." He always remembered the conventionalities. "You had better pay the answers," he remarked to his son.

"Right. I'll go and tell Johnson to get out the cart." He disappeared through the window.

"Kitty is not much like her mother, is she?" Mrs. Wrenford said, looking at her.

"Oh, no, I'm like my father," the girl said.

"Do you remember him?"

"No, he died when I was a baby." She felt reluctant to speak of him to Mrs. Wrenford, but it was impossible not to answer her.

"How sad. Did he die abroad?"

"No, in England—near Brighton. I don't know much about it—I never like to ask mother," she added distantly.

"Poor chap—went for a holiday perhaps, got pneumonia," Sir George put in.

"Kitty," Harry called, "come along."

"I wish I had a daughter." Mrs. Wrenford looked after her, and then at the trim flower-beds beyond the terrace. "What a lovely place this is," she added with a sigh. "I leave all my cares behind me when I come."

"I hope you will always say that," Sir George answered politely.

"When the young people come they won't want me."

"I shall. You and Mrs. Roberts must be friends—she will be here a good deal."

"I feel supplanted."

"Supplanted—what do you mean?" He eased his throat about in his collar. "You mustn't be jealous, you know. We are old friends, and it's always pleasant to see you."

"How dear you are." She held out her hand. He gave it a little business-like shake and turned to the writing-table as if to look for some papers.

"Did you say that Kitty's father was a clergyman?" she asked.

"No, no, you've got mixed. It was Mrs. Roberts's father. He was a chaplain on the Riviera. I don't think she said where, precisely—one never likes to ask too many questions."

"Of course not—especially under the circumstances. But it's interesting to know." She shook her head and looked grave. "It's almost a duty to know the pedigrees, and any details in them, of those with whom our lives are to be bound up."

"Of course, of course—you are steering towards my great subject."

"There are so many skeletons, and people put such—such wonderful locks on the cupboards they keep them in, that sometimes they are never picked or even suspected till it's too late."

Mrs. Roberts came in by the window. Sir George turned to her with the smile that lately his face had always worn for her. "Mrs. Wrenford is trying to make me talk of hereditary matters," he said.

"Yes?" She looked a little bewildered.

"Do come and join in," Mrs. Wrenford said. "It's so extraordinarily interesting to me."

Mrs. Roberts hesitated. "I don't think that I have anything to say about it." She crossed to the sofa corner that had become her recognised place and took up her work.

"It's a great subject." Sir George was quite pleased to find something he could talk about. "A human character is a mosaic put together by all sorts of influences—some of them contributed perhaps by a forgotten generation; our great-grandfathers may have bequeathed us any number of vices or virtues."

"It's very tiresome of them," Mrs. Wrenford laughed.

"I think it was Emerson who said that many of us are omnibuses carrying our ancestors." Sir George was well started.

"Or some one else said it," Mrs. Wrenford answered. "I wonder if they have a good time. I think it's rather trying that people should be afflicted by their great-grandfathers. Why can't they remain decently buried?"

He answered rather severely—he thought the subject too important to be treated with levity: "They prove that we have within us the possibility of continuity in some form. Every one of us has the chance—or the power—to start a weakness or a crime through unborn generations."

"It's a terrible temptation," she laughed; "it would be rather amusing to try and hurl a series of picturesque crimes down through the centuries."

He shook his head, "I don't agree with you."

"You see the worst of it is," Mrs. Wrenford laughed,

"that we don't know when that omnibus may let a passenger get out—into the present generation."

Mrs. Roberts bending over her blue silk shivered a little.

Mrs. Wrenford, watching her closely and still half-laughing, went on, "I should like to put a case to you: the man who is building my cottage at Witney. I began it in a simple mood, Mrs. Roberts, but I shall never live in it, the rooms will be too small and I daresay carwiggly. I shall probably sell it one day when I am stony; we are all stony sometimes——"

"Eh, what's the matter?" Sir George asked Harry, who had come to the window.

"The mare has cast a shoe, so we can't have the dogcart. Johnson has taken the telegrams to Lea-field."

"Oh, very well," he answered rather shortly, representing the interruption.

Harry retreated to Kitty, who was waiting for him outside the window.

"What were you going to say about your builder?" Sir George asked Mrs. Wrenford.

"He was a bankrupt once, a fraudulent one—he did something wrong with money."

"A good many people do," with a mildly humorous air—feeling that he had been too serious before—"either from having too much or too little."

"So he was taken up and put in prison," she went on with a little sigh. "When he was let out he couldn't—couldn't get work; he came to me and offered to build my cottage very cheaply, for much less than the Oxford builder. Do you think I was wrong to employ him?"

"It was very kind of you; I don't know that I should have done it myself."

Then Mrs. Roberts looked up, her face was very white as she asked:

"Would you make him an outcast and a beggar because he had once—only once—done something wrong?"

"It sounds brutal; but it's a difficult matter," Sir George said. "This man had broken the law. The life of a man who has done that is broken too. Perhaps I should employ him. I probably should if I liked him; but I should keep a sharp look-out. All penalties have to be paid at some time; it's no good thinking we shall escape; the unseen creditor hangs round and exacts payment, though sometimes he gives us a long run before he appears."

"But if this poor bankrupt went to prison he paid the penalty." Helen urged almost piteously: her enemy smiled a little.

The lovers sauntered off to the wood. "He's having a real good go at the heredity business this time," Harry laughed.

"You can never tell when it is paid in full, that's the worst of it," they heard Sir George say as they went.

"One of his daughters is going to be married." Mrs. Wrenford looked across to the sofa—"married very well, too."

"Lucky for her—perhaps not for her husband," Sir George answered briskly.

"Now if you were the young man to whom she was engaged, would it make any difference in your feeling towards her?"

Mrs. Roberts's needle stopped for one second, she leant forward, then went on with her work.

"Well, I don't know—— I should think it worried him." Sir George considered for a moment before he added, "I know this, that if I were the young man's father I should do my best to prevent the marriage."

"But she wouldn't become a fraudulent bankrupt because her father was one." Mrs. Roberts tried to make her voice steady.

Mrs. Wrenford looked her straight in the face. "It's singular how often girls take after their fathers," she said.

"She mightn't become a fraudulent bankrupt," Sir George allowed, "but she might break out in other directions, be careless or extravagant with money for instance, run up bills and not pay them—that sort of thing. You never know what turn things will take if they get a chance of running riot in human nature."

Mrs. Roberts looked up with frightened eyes and formed her words with difficulty, "But are the people, and the children of people, who do things that are not lawful—things that are wrong—to suffer always—to be set apart, as if they were plague-stricken? We don't know what impelled them or what justification they may have had in their hearts—it is cruel!" She put her hand to her throat as if to still its throbbing.

It was the first time that Sir George had seen anything approaching vehemence in her; it took him by surprise. "I told you at Cannero," he said, "that I believe in every struggle we can make to give survival to the fittest—morally and physically—that way lies the millennium." He thought he was being rather fine and inflexible.

"But a millennium of perfection would be rather dull, and very tiring—full of the higher virtues, you know. It's so difficult to live up to things; much easier to live down to them," Mrs. Wrenford laughed. "Besides, poor sinners are often very charming—don't you think so, Mrs. Roberts?"

"Are they? I don't know. But they suffer——" There was a thrill in the voice, it reached Sir George's heart. She stopped as if afraid of saying too much.

"There will always be enough suffering," he said; "even the best are not let off too easily."

"And it's the sinners and not the saints who are best loved." Mrs. Wrenford was speaking. "Wouldn't it be a pity to do away with anything that—that—generates"—she knew Sir George would like the word—"the best human love—we all need it?" She made her manner quite touching, and inwardly was vastly amused at herself.

"In effect you are trying to argue that it would be a pity to stamp out disease because it would do away with the necessity for tender nursing." He seemed a little impatient: he disliked too much sentiment.

A little shiver passed through Mrs. Roberts. The woman who was torturing her saw it. "Mrs. Roberts is quite sad," she said; "but she and Kitty look as if they had strayed from a place where every one was like themselves—a dear, heavenly sort of world."

"You are very kind."

"Sir George tells me that your father was a clergyman. That in itself sounds almost like an idyll."

"Does it?" The blue silk was turned for more convenient holding.

"Somewhere on the Riviera, I understand. Where was it precisely? Do tell me."

"At Santa Maria."

"Ah! Kitty is very like her father isn't she?"

"Did you know him?" Sir George asked quickly. Some misgiving was taking hold of him.

"I can't be sure," Mrs. Wrenford answered; "I never went to that part of the world. But Kitty's face reminds me so much of some one." Then suddenly another question came, "Where is Santa Maria? Is it near Sestri Levante?"

"Yes, fairly near." Helen was gathering up her work.

"You must have known Mr. Godstone?"

"Yes, I knew him," Mrs. Roberts announced.

"But did you?" Sir George asked Mrs. Wrenford, rather surprised.

"Oh, no. He's a very learned person, and used to be always writing to the *Times* about the Fieschi family at one time. I don't know anything about the Fieschis; I daresay they were tiresome people, and it's a good thing that they have been mouldy and stone-covered these hundreds of years"—and somehow the adjective made the other woman realise how cruel the speaker could be, "but his letters were always dated Sestri Levante."

"A good memory," Sir George remarked.

Mrs. Roberts got up and slowly crossed the room. She was going to Lady Culworthy. Sir George closed the door and came back towards Mrs. Wrenford.

"She is a singularly graceful woman!" he said.

"She's thin; thinness so often counts for grace-

fulness, just as something else—I can't remember a bit what it is—does for righteousness."

He looked at her disapprovingly, and thought there must be a motley crew if any omnibus held her ancestors.

She sat with her hands clasping her knee, ruminating. "A very curious woman," she said half to herself; "so remote and strange, I feel as if she is a resurrection that has left its humanity behind—something is dead in her."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I wonder——" She stopped, and then repeated half trembling, as if anxious not to give offence, "I wonder why it is you are so anxious for this marriage?"

"Mrs. Roberts is a beautiful woman, and Kitty one of the most charming girls I have ever met. I told Harry to-day that I believed I was falling in love with the mother, just as he had done with the daughter." He said it firmly, and watched the effect of his words. It took him by surprise.

She stood up and faced him. "And you know nothing about them—nothing at all except what she and the aunt—this aunt you saw in Italy, a doctor's wife—chose to tell you—chose that you should believe."

For a moment an unreasoning fear possessed him, but unwittingly her next words dissipated it.

"And for her I have been supplanted—thrown out!" She spoke vehemently; her face was flushed, her eyes reproachful.

"Good heavens," he thought, "she is jealous! That accounts for everything." In the same moment he

dismissed his vague distrust of one woman and forgave the other: men so easily forgive jealousy provoked by themselves. He was even amused, though he was careful not to betray it. "Supplanted?" he said. "I don't understand. It's the second time you have used that word."

She was playing an exciting game. The stake was her chance of a name and position she had hardly considered before, except as a background to her thoughts of more advanced middle age, and only valued now that she felt she might be losing the possibility of it for ever. "I know, and I mean it," she answered. "Don't you remember when you met me in Paris, the year after the man to whom it was my misfortune to be married had died?"

"Perfectly; but it was purely by accident that we met."

"You were awfully good to me."

"My dear lady," he said kindly but severely, "you were lonely—as I had been then for two or three years——"

"But you had been married to a sweet woman, I to a brute."

He disliked such a reference to any husband—it was unbecoming. "You told me that he had behaved unfairly and I was sorry for you."

"You cared for me a little—all that happy week."

The speech nettled him, but he tried to hide it.

"I was fascinated by you—I own it—you were, and are, a very charming woman, and I am only a man. But there was nothing serious between us, as you know. I told you plainly that I had no intention of doing anything that would lessen my son's sufficiency for the

career I hoped was before him—that he was and would be always the first consideration in the world to me.”

“You did care for me, whether you said it or not.” She almost whispered it, and put out her white and shapely hands, but the rings that half covered the fingers repelled him. “Am I too old now—have I grown too plain?”

“Plain! You are a very handsome woman still.”

“And men love me still,” she pleaded softly.

“I know. You were always anxious to let me see it; that of itself would have cured me if I had been serious.”

“I couldn’t help it if they cared for me. I was never heartless or cruel to them.”

“I daresay; but it would be impossible to me to want the whole of what so many men could get so little.”

She gave a half pathetic little laugh. “I am not the heartless person you think me,” she said. “I am only foolish, as every woman is who has no strong man’s hand to grip. It’s only your cold, passionless woman”—a little contempt crept into her voice—“who can steer her life alone—alone—entirely without reproach.”

Her words appealed to him. “I know you are a warm-hearted creature.” He shook her hand with real friendliness. “And you are quite right; women need men—their help and counsel.”

“As for my lovers—generally I only catch at straws and let them go.” She raised her eyes to his.

“That’s right; always let them go—especially when they take the form of a Mr. Newsted Bryan.”

She felt that she had come out, on the whole, fairly

well—that Mrs. Roberts's position was not quite what it had been. An hour or two later, carelessly glancing at the letters on the hall-table ready for the post, she noticed that one was directed, in Sir George's handwriting, to Edward Godstone.

"Ah," she said to herself, "he has written to him, has he. A good thing that old fogey was out of the way and didn't know."

CHAPTER XXII

WENDOVER arrived later than they had expected. He had lunched at Oxford on his way, and mistaken his direction from it. But there was time enough to show him the garden at Highwoods—even to give him a glimpse of the forest.

"I wish you were coming back to London with us," Kitty said to her mother when they had a last few words together, while she was packing.

"It would seem so rude to Lady Culworthy; besides, there wouldn't be room for me in the motor."

Kitty considered a moment, then suddenly she burst out, "Mother, I don't know why, but I can't bear Mrs. Wrenford. I am afraid of her; she makes one say and do things against one's will, and she's always watching us. The visit is quite different since she came."

"It will soon be over. I told Sir George to-day that I wanted to go by an early train in the morning." This was on Sunday, of course. "The first week in September," she said almost to herself, "and you will be safe."

"Safe?" Kitty looked up.

But her mother retreated into her aloof manner. "I never quite believe in any happiness away from mountains. Suppose," she said suddenly, before she was aware of it—she thought afterwards that it had been cruel—"such strange things happen, you know—suppose your engagement were broken off?"

"I should die—it would kill me," Kitty answered quickly.

"Oh, no; one never dies. It takes so much to kill."

"I don't believe I have any fighting strength."

"It comes when we want it—we all want it at some time. Let us go down if you are ready, and see what they are doing."

Wendover and Mrs. Wrenford were standing by the drawing-room window. The laughter was rumbling in his throat as he looked at her from out of his narrow, deep-set eyes. They seemed to be on easy almost intimate terms, though they had never met till an hour ago. "It gives me a high opinion of your child-like simplicity that you should think it an honour to meet me," he was saying, "but it's a state of mind I wouldn't have changed for the world."

"Great men are always so modest," she answered, and evidently imagined that she was making an impression.

"I'm glad to hear it, though modesty is generally a pinchbeck virtue in my sex—and occasionally in yours."

"I wonder if I could ever—ever persuade you to come and see me?" she said softly, after a moment's hesitation.

"Well, at present I'm the bondman of a demon who is usually described as a publisher. He persuaded me to put my name to a document which binds me to have a book ready for his meshes within the next two months."

"And of course he's robbing you? They always do. Newsted Bryan hasn't had twenty pounds yet for his novel, though it made a sensation."

Sir George looked up from his writing-table. "A good thing too," he snapped.

"Well, as to money, I don't know," Wendover an-

swered. "I expect he's honest in that elementary particular; but he's robbing me of my fresh air and liberty. Writing is a difficult art."

"Yet you speak so easily—so beautifully."

"That's another matter. We chattered on boughs and swung our tails round us long before we had taken to defacing white paper with little black marks. I expect the end of it will be that I shall talk it to a typist for a couple of hours a day."

"There are so many pretty ones now."

"The thoughts of women turn lightly in a given direction. The typist I shall get will be one I can curse at intervals—for no fault of his own.—Mrs. Roberts," going towards her, "I should like to deliver some confidential messages with which Miss Bateson entrusted me." They went out on to the terrace.

"Ah!" Mrs. Wrenford said, as she watched them walk away, "she evidently cares for him. Do you think he'll marry her?"

"I believe Mrs. Roberts to be devoted to the memory of her husband," Sir George answered uneasily. "Wendover is only an old friend."

"Don't you think that old friends sometimes want to safeguard their affection for each other?" She looked at him wistfully and went a step nearer.

"I've not considered that point of view. Here are the children." He turned with relief for some last words with his son.

"Who's Mrs. Wrenford? She manages to appropriate a good deal of atmosphere to herself," Wendover asked, as they strolled away from the house.

"An old friend of Sir George's."

"Well, she doesn't add to the credit of his friendships. A handsome woman—however, I didn't come out here to discuss her; she's not my sort."

"I don't like her; she frightens me."

"The wisdom of the unconscious," he muttered.

"What is that?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't know, but it's there—in most of us at times. It does what it can, but it is hand tied and dumb, and has to let us go headlong towards the devil occasionally. Perhaps it'll take you safely down a side track this time."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, my dear; but I mean it. Now tell me what precisely is the matter. You are looking very ill."

"I shall be well in September. When the marriage is over I shall go somewhere very far off—probably with Miss Bateson and her brother."

"Oh, will you?" he growled. "Well, I don't want to rake up matters again—we have discussed them enough already—but somehow I scent mischief with that woman here. If you take my advice you will confide in the buffalo while there is still time. I should take him for a walk after dinner and unburden myself in the twilight and the sanctity of the Sabbath evening."

"It's too late."

"I don't believe it. I like him." He looked at his watch. "It's time we were off, if we are to dine with Miss Bateson before Harry starts for Paris." They turned towards the house. "Does Mrs. Wrenford want to be Lady Buffalo?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, it's a good thing you are going up to-morrow; if you stayed here longer, that lady with the streak of grey would worst you. Now!—it's time. Where are those creatures?"

In ten minutes the motor was a dark patch in the distance, with a halo of dust round it.

Helen Roberts hurried to an end of the garden that gave a distant view of the road, and stayed there a little while, glad to be alone. The softness of a July evening, the hush of Sunday—of Sunday in the country—was in the air. The quiet and beauty appealed to her as they always did; but she thought, as she walked back to the house, lingering here and there where the shade was deepest, that she knew how Eve had felt when the serpent was in Eden and the avenging Angel had not yet found her out. Now that the children had gone, too, she was half afraid to re-enter the drawing-room, lest another turn of the thumbscrew should come, or an unseen gate creak and open, through which she would be thrown to the lions. There was Lady Culworthy's room upstairs; perhaps that would afford an escape. She determined to stay with her till dinner time. Once or twice it had occurred to her to tell her secret there, to trust to the intercession and understanding of another woman. If Lady Culworthy had only been better, it might have happened so; but it was impossible to enter upon it while she was ill. She crossed the lawn, went up the terrace steps, and stood by the drawing-room window hesitating.

"My dear Mrs. Roberts, we wondered what had become of you." Sir George was seated at the writing-table again.

"I watched them out of sight," she explained.

"A mother's heart journeys so far." Mrs. Wrenford's voice was soft, but it sent a shudder through her listener.

"I meant to give Harry some letters to post in London," Sir George went on. "However, there's time still to send them to the village; and, there's something we've forgotten—at least it didn't occur to me at all till Mrs. Wrenford spoke about it just now. We ought to send a paragraph to the *Times* and *Morning Post*."

"A paragraph!"

"Of the engagement—the announcement of the coming marriage." He took up his pen.

"Oh, no," she began eagerly, then her voice subsided into its usual tone. "I hate publicity and paragraphs."

"So do I, as a rule, but this is different. Harry is the only son of his father; some day I hope he will be more and do more. Now then—'A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place'—that's the way, I believe?" He was amused and elated.

"Not yet—let us wait."

"Wait? Why should we wait? Are you afraid it will bring down letters and congratulations?"

"You would have them to answer," she said, trying to put him off.

"I should enjoy it—a new experience. There'll be wedding presents too. Kitty will like those. It's rather a bore to give them sometimes, but they'll be extremely pleasant to receive." He began to write again. "A marriage has been arranged, and will shortly take place, between Henry Mitchell Kerriston, only son of Sir George Kerriston, Bart., and Katherine"—I suppose it's Katherine, she wasn't christened Kitty? Has she any other name?"

"Katherine Evelyn."

"'Only daughter of'—what was your husband's name?"

"His name?" The expression that suggested fright came to her eyes again for just one moment; he remembered it at Cannero and in the forest, but it didn't occur to him now, any more than it did then, to wonder what it might mean.

"His Christian name?" Sir George repeated.

"John," she answered slowly.

"The late John Roberts, Barrister-at-Law of—of where?"

She hesitated and lost her head. "I should like you to say 'daughter of Mrs. Roberts of Cannero, Lago Maggiore'—I have been there so much."

"Well, but——" he stopped and evidently considered his words, "with all due deference to you, and without any wish to be rude, I shouldn't like my son's marriage announced in—in that—that rather one-egged manner; it would look as if your marriage had not been a happy one."

"It was perfectly happy."

"Then what is your objection to the other? 'Barrister-at-Law of'—her father lived somewhere, I suppose?"

"I don't want it announced at all." She felt with relief that her voice was cold and without fear. "I think the personalities in the papers now are unnecessary and—vulgar."

"I should like the notice to appear," he answered firmly. He waited a moment, but she was silent, and looking out towards the trees. "Have you any other reason than the one you have given?"

"I would rather it were left alone; but you must do

as you please." She seemed frigid, in reality she was shaking with fear.

The servant entered; it was time to send to the post. Sir George considered a moment. "Very well, we'll put it off till to-morrow." He gave the letters to the servant and took up a paper-knife.

With a little inclination of her head she dismissed the subject. "I think I will go to Lady Culworthy again," she said, and left the room.

Mrs. Wrenford looked up significantly. "What a strange incident!"

"There must be some reason," he said thoughtfully.

"There is, as you say—there must be."

"Then, perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me what it is?"

With a little flicker of mockery in her eyes she answered, "I don't think the dear lady cared for our talk yesterday about heredity."

"Why shouldn't she?"

"One never knows——"

"What do you mean?" It was almost a demand.

"Nothing, nothing, but there are such strange things in the world." Her voice became sympathetic and held him—a half dismayed listener—with its clear pronunciation, that made every word sound like the rustle of a leaf from a deep-rooted tree of knowledge. "I often think there's a ghostly library somewhere, with rows of volumes full of untold things—I never want to reach them down. It's so wise sometimes not to know."

"To know what?"

She shook her head and pulled the folds of her skirt together. "How can I tell; there are so many back-grounds to lives—just as there are to pictures—painted

out utterly at variance with the foregrounds that are painted in."

He almost glared at her. "This is very clever, but what do you mean? It has nothing to do with the point we were discussing just now."

"It has—only you won't believe it," she answered in a low voice.

"Mrs. Wrenford," he was getting angry, but his voice trembled a little, "will you be good enough to speak plainly?"

"I hate people who speak plainly; they do so much harm."

He turned to the table again, and fidgeted with his pen; perhaps, after all, it was only jealousy, the uncharitableness of one woman to another.

"Why not write out the paragraph?" she suggested; "perhaps when Mrs. Roberts sees how harmless it is——"

"No," he answered, "we'll wait."

She rose with a shrug and sauntered out to the terrace. He watched her go down the steps at the end and cross to the shrubbery, where they had walked on the first day of her visit, then with a feeling of irritation he turned away; for some reason he did not stop to consider he was beginning to hate her.

He looked at the partly written paragraph on the table. "But there is something wrong," he thought, "I've felt it for the last day or two."

Mrs. Roberts showed no sign of remembering their little scene when she appeared at the dinner-table, though as a matter of fact she was trembling with dread and misery. Sir George's manner was formal

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and uneasy; once or twice she saw his face twitch. As soon as possible she rose and went back to Lady Culworthy, with the excuse that it was for the last time. In the morning she was to leave the house too early to say good-bye then. The carriage was to be at the door at ten o'clock; it was one of Sir George's weaknesses to get to the station a quarter of an hour before a train was due. She heard his voice falter as he wished her good-night; his hand hardly touched the one she held out. He watched her cross the hall and begin to ascend the stairs before he closed the drawing-room door. "I shall ask you to excuse me early too, this evening," he said, when he returned to Mrs. Wrenford. "There are some letters I must write before going up to London to-morrow."

"Of course, of course," she answered. "But let me play something to you before you begin; you are upset, it will help you—soothe you."

He could think of no polite excuse, and retreated to the window when he had opened the piano for her. He was not a musician; he knew what he liked, but that was all. She played a dreamy reverie; and she was right, it soothed him; but she drifted to lighter music and he found it irritating and ill-adapted to his humour. He made no comment beyond a half absent "thank you—thank you." Presently in a low, cultivated voice she began the little French songs that had once amused him and any guests staying at Highwoods. Her manner was too dramatic for a drawing-room and a solitary listener. He felt that she was trying to get at him, that the songs were meant to be alluring; but in reality he thought they were *risqué* and, looking at the grey streak in her hair, that she was too old to sing

them—a suggestion of naughtiness that might be laughed at in a young woman was repelling in an elderly one. Kitty's snatches of melancholy Polish folk songs had been much more to his mind. They were in his memory now as Mrs. Wrenford turned and looked at him and sang one little passionate line in a whisper—it made him shudder. He got up and went towards her.

"I am afraid that is not quite the sort of song for to-night," he said. "Times change, I no longer bar secular music on Sunday evening—but it should be chosen carefully."

"Oh, I am so sorry—I thought you were sad," she said caressingly. "I wanted to—to——"

"No, I am only preoccupied. I will ask you to excuse me now. I must get some business papers in order, besides attending to the letters. It's ten o'clock—a little beauty sleep?" he tried to recover some good humour. "Next time we will have a more comprehensive house party for you. I am afraid that Elizabeth's illness has made this visit a little grey. Good-night."

"Dear Sir George," she murmured as she gave him her hand. "Of course you want to be alone. I do so understand. I'll play a little Chopin to put myself in a right frame of mind, and go to bed." She sat still till he had left the room; as the door latched with a little click she made a face at it. "I'm certain I couldn't stand him—if it wasn't for the beastly duns I would tell him so," she said to herself as she put her hands on the keys. "But I must rout that woman somehow. I hate her so——" she launched into the funeral march. The wonderful chords sounded furious as she thundered them out.

CHAPTER XXIII

BREAKFAST was nearly over. In three-quarters of an hour the carriage would be at the door. Helen was counting the minutes. Sir George was perfectly courteous; but she felt that he was watching her. His voice sent a shiver to her heart.

"I am going to London this afternoon," he said, as he rose from the table, "and there are some matters I should like to discuss with you. Would it be convenient to you to see me at six o'clock to-day, or if not, what hour to-morrow would suit you?"

"I shall be there to-day," she answered, "if you are not too tired after the journey."

"Thank you," he said stiffly. "I will wait upon you then. I'm going round to the stables now, but I shall be back before you start; you have more than half an hour yet—three-quarters." He went out and left the two women alone.

"Your packing is done, I know," Mrs. Wrenford said; "I saw the luggage being carried down."

"But I must go and find my work-bag; I left it in the drawing-room." She rose and went to look for it. Mrs. Wrenford followed her in quickly and shut the door.

"I must speak to you," she said, in answer to a look of surprised inquiry, "but I don't know how I'm going to begin"; she was eager but obvious trying to hold herself in.

Helen had found the work-bag; it was in her hand.

She crossed to the door, turned and stood with her back towards it, but a little way from it.

Mrs. Wrenford waited a moment, then, with a gasp that was almost triumphant, she said, "I wish you had trusted me. I wanted to be your friend, to help you."

"You are very good; but do I need help?" It was asked coldly.

"I'm afraid you do; you want the advice of a clear-headed woman of the world. You do indeed." She went a step towards her. "Your real name is not Roberts?"

There was no answer, but the scared expression found its way to the blue eyes.

"I know who you are; you said your father was chaplain at Santa Maria. John Roycefield married his daughter."

Helen faced her enemy without flinching. "He was my husband," she said. "Did you know him?"

A little smile that somehow ended fiercely—all in a moment—came over Mrs. Wrenford's face. "Yes; I knew him long ago." She looked searchingly at the woman before her, then went on hurriedly, "You gave yourself away completely over that paragraph. I should have let him put in what he pleased."

There was no answer.

"Does Harry know?" she asked.

"No." There was a little bewilderment in the tone, and surprise that the other should presume to question her.

"I wonder you didn't tell Sir George in confidence."

"I meant to—at first."

"The silly notions about heredity frightened you, I suppose?"

"Perhaps."

"I am afraid you will have to put an end to the engagement."

Mrs. Roberts backed to the white door till her figure was sharply outlined against it. She kept her head erect, but her lips were hardly able to move till the one word "Kitty" came almost unconsciously from them.

"She'll get over it," Mrs. Wrenford said consolingly; "it's women who suffer. The young things moan, but they get through." She waited a moment, but Mrs. Roberts stood staring at her and made no sign. "You will have to break it off," she went on; "Sir George is suspicious. He is making inquiries—I happen to know it—and he is a proud man. He would no more let the daughter of a man who had been convicted and sent to prison into his family than he would fly, and Harry will think he is quite right when it comes to the scratch. He is devoted to his father, who needn't give him a shilling unless he likes—you know that? You may depend upon it he will think twice before ruining his career." She waited a moment between each sentence, but there was no answer; apparently she had made no impression. "And if they did marry," she went on, "Harry would probably be told to lock up his cheque book so that the taint in her blood mightn't get a chance."

The colour returned to Mrs. Roberts's lips at that sting. It helped her; the fighting power came, now that it was needed, as she had told Kitty it would. She held her head a little more erect. "I don't understand why you speak to me about it," she said.

Mrs. Wrenford took a step backwards; she felt inferior before the haughty almost silent woman whom

she was trying to torture. The air of commonness she showed occasionally sat plainly upon her; she could see that it was recognised, and the aloofness, the calm face, the tall figure maddened her. It seemed as if it were she and not that other who was at a disadvantage.

"What is it to you?" Mrs. Roberts asked coldly.

"I've told you already," Mrs. Wrenford answered, "that I want to advise you, to help you. It's better to own when you've lost the game; it sometimes saves the situation and pays one's losses, too, in the long run." She tried to be easy, even confidential, but Helen made no sign of changing her attitude. "I should break it off at once and go abroad. If your antecedents are not his business, Sir George won't take the trouble to investigate them."

"Why are you so anxious to see it broken off?"

Mrs. Wrenford shrugged her shoulders and looked up and smiled; she had a card to play that amused her. But Mrs. Roberts only looked haughtily back at her. "I may marry Sir George and—and I don't want to be unkind to you; but perhaps I'm not very anxious to have Kitty for my step-daughter. I have my pride too; it would be very awkward."

The woman against the door made a little movement of her head. "Naturally."

"I tell you this—about Sir George and myself—in confidence," she added, feeling that she might have been indiscreet.

"I quite understand." A clock on the mantelpiece chimed. "Is that all?—I think I must get ready." Helen turned to the door, with a little inclination of the head she went slowly out.

In the hall she met Sir George. "I don't want to hurry you," he said, "but the carriage will be here directly."

"I shall be down in five minutes." She heard him enter the drawing-room and shut the door.

Mrs. Wrenford was standing convulsed with excitement, her face flushed, her eyes burning as if a flame from hell had leaped into them.

"What is it?" Sir George asked; but he knew that the crisis had come. "You have been having some scene with Mrs. Roberts?"

"Yes, I have," she cried. "I did what I could to warn you, but you wouldn't believe me."

"You are doing your best—and have been—to make some irreparable mischief."

She turned upon him fiercely. "I have been trying to prevent your family from being disgraced. Mrs. Roberts was the wife of a convict—of a man who died in prison—and Kitty is his daughter. Now, do you want your son to marry her?"

He looked at her as if he thought she had gone mad; but in his heart he knew that what she said was true. "How do you know, and if it's true why didn't you say so at first?"

With the declaration of the damning fact her rage had collapsed; fright was taking its place. Her voice was different, it almost trembled as she answered, "I wasn't sure, I didn't want to betray her, I wanted to be quite, quite certain, and"—she went up to him a little abjectly and put her hand on his shoulder. He drew back angrily—"I wanted to save you this painful discovery."

"At any rate the truth shall be stated now and at once;" he went towards the door.

She flew to him and held him back. "Oh, wait," she entreated, "wait—wait. I have advised her to break it off; she'll write, you will see. Let her leave the house quietly. What will you do—what can you say—if you know now? Oh, it's too dreadful."

He shook her off as if she had been a scorpion. "I can manage my own affairs; leave me alone," he said.

"Oh, don't, don't!" She covered her face with her hands. "You don't know what I've been going through—what it has been to me—how it has tortured me."

He forgot how nearly the affair concerned him for a moment and stared at her as if he thought her demented; she looked back at him with dismay.

"I couldn't believe it—I couldn't believe it." She recovered a little and entreated again. "Let her go, dear Sir George, take my advice and let her go."

Then the door opened and Helen entered ready to depart, pale and composed, though the working of pain showed in the wide open eyes and the twitch of the beautiful mouth. Sir George went a step towards her—his voice shook—"Mrs. Roberts," he said, "I meant to have seen you to-day in London, to ask you some questions I should be bound to put if my son marries your daughter. But Mrs. Wrenford has made a statement, I must ask you at once if it is true."

"It is quite true."

"You know what she has said?"

"That my husband—broke the law." She stopped, her lips refused to go on for a moment.

"He was convicted."

"Yes."

"And died in prison?"

"Yes, he died in prison."

A sound of pain and dismay came from him. He looked angrily at Mrs. Wrenford and made a sign. She acknowledged it with a disdainful shrug and left them alone.

Helen's manner changed then. It was calm still, but she looked as if she were on the rack. "I would have prevented the engagement if I could," she said slowly; "I did once, but when it was done I was helpless. Kitty didn't know—and she would have broken her heart."

"If people break the laws their children have to pay the penalty," he said sternly; "there is such a thing as honourable conduct. You should have told Harry the truth."

"I would, but he looked so young I couldn't bear to do it."

"Then you should have told me directly I came to Cannero."

"I meant to do so at first—then I wavered and was afraid. There was Kitty's happiness at stake. She is the whole world to me"—the desolation in the tone made itself felt even through his anger—"and you said that what you wanted was an unblemished name."

"It is what I mean to have in my family, madam," he said harshly.

They heard faintly the sound of carriage-wheels and the restless movement of the horses as they stopped in front of the hall door.

"I know—I know—but all that talk about heredity at Cannero frightened me so. It did again here—that talk the other day"—she shuddered. "I was afraid

you would think it was in Kitty's nature—and yet what her father did was not in his nature.”

“ I hope not for her sake.”

“ It was done on an impulse.”

“ We will not discuss that;” he shook his head impatiently. “ The facts of his life are sufficient, and of these it was your duty to inform me.”

“ I know;” she bowed her head meekly. He thought afterwards that she had looked like a saint remembering some human sin.

“ You are aware, of course, that the marriage is absolutely impossible? ”

“ Yes;” her lips trembled, there was a dry sob in her throat. “ But they love each other so.”

“ There are some things that count before love,” he answered. “ I would disown him altogether—I would rather see him in his grave—than that he should carry out this marriage and bring disgrace on our name—into our family. I shall write to him to-day.”

“ Yes,” she said hopelessly, “ and I will tell Kitty. You must try and forgive me, to remember that I did it for her—and him.” He knew it was not Harry she meant by that last word: for a moment it seemed to thrust him back into the years of her life that were unknown to him. “ You’ve been very good to me;” she turned towards the door. “ It’s time to go.”

“ I wish this could have been delayed till I saw you in London—that it had been said under any roof but mine,” he said with cold apology.

At the door she stopped and looked round at him. “ There is one thing more—Kitty doesn’t know. She knows nothing about her father. If you see her again, don’t tell her. Ask Harry not to tell her. It would be

so dreadful—she knows the best of him, all that he was—except for this one thing.” She spoke differently, the low voice trembled with emotion; it took him by surprise. He felt that she was not cold, as he had supposed, not passionless, but that she had been stunned, suppressed, imprisoned by the history that had just been revealed to him, by the years with the burden of it in them that she had lived through in silence.

“But what will you say to Kitty?” He had pulled up by the doorway. They stood facing each other.

“I don’t know.”

“I must tell my son the whole truth.” He was determined to keep his unyielding attitude, though her request had shaken it.

“Yes—tell him what you like; but Kitty needn’t know. Harry will be careful if you tell him—he is so tender. He knows what her father has been to her.”

“I will tell him what you say,” he answered coldly.

She bowed her head and went out. He followed her to the carriage. “You will excuse me for not coming to see you off.” It was said to cover the situation; but the servants wondered at the strangeness of his voice. The groom noticed that she made a little inclination of her head but spoke no word, and that neither of them held out a hand to the other at parting.

The carriage drove off briskly; he felt as if it were hurrying away the dead he had loved.

He re-entered the house, and the same idea beset him as he passed the drawing-room—a living woman had been in it yesterday, a dead one had just left it. He had no courage to go in; he crossed to the library on the other side of the hall, entered, and pushed the door to, but without latching it, and sat down by a carved oak

table on which were writing materials and a little pile of books waiting to be catalogued. He leant his head down on his hands and gave himself up to a sense of loss, of utter inability to grapple with the catastrophe that had come about so suddenly.

Mrs. Wrenford, listening upstairs, waited till the carriage was out of sight and sound. Then she crept down softly over the rugs in the hall to the library door and pushed it a little way open. Sir George was sitting with his back towards her; he neither saw nor heard. She stole to his side. "Oh, I'm so sorry, so grieved," she whispered.

He started and got up, angry and bewildered. She saw him recoil from her; it roused again the ungovernable hatred she felt for Helen.

"What could I do?" she asked. "I couldn't help myself."

"You meant well, but I wish you had left it alone."

"I tried—I tried—that's why I wanted her to go away quietly; but I felt that you had to know."

"I suppose you were right," he answered grudgingly; "you must forgive me if I jib."

"I do—I do;" she tried to put sympathy into her voice. "I was sorry for her too; it would have been such salvation for the girl if she had married Harry."

His anger came back at that. "You should have spoken at once," he said.

"I told you why I hesitated."

"I would have staked my life upon her honour. I believe I was in love with her," he answered ruefully, forgetting everything for a moment but the face of the woman who had gone.

Her eyes flashed with anger and contempt. "Men are so easily taken in by that type of woman," she said.

He turned to the writing-table. "Poor Harry!" He spoke to himself rather than to her.

"It won't do him any harm; he will get over it; he'll probably marry a clever woman older than himself—they generally do. I am so sorry for you"—she put her hand on his arm.

"For God's sake leave me alone!" he exclaimed. "You don't seem to understand what this business has been to me. At what time is the motor coming?"

"At eleven——"

"I will see you again when I hear it;" he followed her to the door and shut it when she had gone.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE sun was shining on the flat Oxfordshire landscape, on the long straight mile, and the row of scanty poplar trees above it. Mrs. Roberts counted them aimlessly as she drove to the station, and remembered her own thoughts when she had crawled up the hill in the carriage to Highwoods with Sir George five days ago—how he had pointed out the landmarks, and she had tried not to let him discover that she was disappointed with the countryside that was near his home. At a turn of the road she could see a mass of the forest stretching far away. She wondered if it looked blacker still in the winter when the leaves were gone; perhaps, then, some little patches of light showed through the bare branches. She shut her eyes for a moment to see the pools again, and the rabbits that scampered into the underwood. The carriage bumped over some unevenness. It was a bad road, she thought, and those stone heaps beneath the hedge were beginning to be grass-grown; why hadn't they been used to mend it? Perhaps they were meant to provide work in the winter; there was probably plenty to be had in the summer time. That quiet, old-fashioned village was Ascot-under-Wychwood, so peaceful looking—she wondered if motors and other modern things would ruin it.

Suddenly the horses quickened their pace, and she saw with a start that the train was in the station—they had reached it; but the carriage would be recognised of course, and the station-master would keep the train,

just as he would have done at a little Italian place. He did, or the time for its departure had not arrived. She was hurried across the line into an empty carriage, told that there would be no changing at Oxford, and in a minute was on her way to London. She could not think at first; it was impossible in the thudding train, with the fields and isolated houses rushing past chasing each other. She closed her eyes and tried to keep her brain still, and so a lull came, a rest that she gratefully realised; then actualities asserted themselves again, and gradually she was sensible of two things—a great load was off her mind—Sir George knew. He knew! She had no longer to act a part for which she despised herself, a part that made her dread every moment lest something should betray the secret she had lived to guard; if she ever saw him again she could at least look him straight in the face, knowing that the eternal truth was between them.

But there was Kitty. What could she say to Kitty? Above all, she mustn't know why it was broken off. "I promised him she should never know; she never shall—it would only make it worse." Mrs. Wrenford had said it was women who suffered; the young things moaned, but they got through. Perhaps it was true. Life would mend again for her, she was so young. But, at least, she could be spared the shame of knowing her father's disgrace; she had always made him a hero, why should she suffer the misery of his downfall. It would be impossible to make her understand the overmastering passion that had carried him away before his marriage, and had led directly or indirectly to his ruin afterwards. A girl who had never known temptations of any sort, brought up with the outlook that had been hers, would

be appalled by the sin rather than the tragedy of years ago; and because of the love she gave her mother, find it hard to forgive her father. But if the knowledge of it could be withheld, the breaking of the engagement would not be so terrible. One thing was certain: if happiness was to reach to her again, she must be taken away—far away—lest some other strange recognition should come.

Then the question darted itself at her. "How did Mrs. Wrenford know?" Was it because she had heard that the chaplain's daughter at Santa Maria married the hero of a *cause célèbre*—for there had been complications that had made the trial one? But that fact had not been mentioned in the papers—that he was married at all had hardly been known even to his intimate friends. But Mrs. Wrenford had seen Kitty's father and recognised the likeness. It made her behaviour difficult to understand—her resentment towards those he had loved, her evident hatred when she left the room after Sir George had entered it? Could it be only because she was anxious to marry Sir George?

Then suddenly a thought came that made her leap to her feet in the railway carriage. Was she *that* woman? She had looked beautiful the other night, with the roses on her dress and the diamond cross at her throat, as she sat opening and shutting her fan, catching the light on its spangles. "She was so compelling," Jack had said, though she remembered that he had always spoken of his feeling for her as a mad infatuation and uncontrollable passion. It had never occurred to her unsophisticated mind that the woman who ruined his life could be going about the world still, satisfied and prosperous. If she had pictured her at all it would have

been in solitude and silence, hidden away in some far corner. She had been glad not to know her name—had avoided knowing it—but now it was maddening that she didn't. She put her hands over her eyes to shut out the image that forced itself upon her, the suggestion that insisted on being considered and was growing into a certainty. In a way it helped, for it showed the impossibility of Kitty going to Highwoods if that woman was to be there—a thousand miles away, and at any price, she thought, rather than such contamination for his child. She wrenched her thoughts from that side of the subject—it was more than she could bear—and turned them on to Kitty. Kitty must be spared as much as possible—that dear living symbol of all that had been best in him should suffer as little as heart and soul could devise; she swore it to him again in her thoughts.

And there was Harry. What would he say and do? Before she had time to consider—quite soon it seemed, in spite of all the misery that possessed her—perhaps because she had dreaded arriving and all that it would mean—she was at Paddington. She walked along the platform half bewildered, for the little journey from Oxfordshire was the only one she had taken alone for years. The one to Trarego, while Kitty was at Andermatt, had been altogether different—done on a mule, up the steep pathway among the mountains—oh, that they had never left them! But they would go back, go back together to the mountains that understood, and the lake that would look up at them with sunshine on its wonderful blue, sparkling and speaking to them, to “the other country,” that Kitty had loved—it would look down on them as if it understood. Perhaps Kitty would be com-

forted there, be lulled by the beauty, and satisfied once more? Or else they would go far, much farther, to some place where there would be no reproach, no haunting dread of such misery as this.

At the end of the platform Bogey met her, his face lighted up with the usual mournful smile. She had been expected by that train, and Miss Bateson had sent him on the box of the carriage with a message that she and Kitty had gone on some expedition, but would be home by luncheon time. Thank Heaven, there was an hour's respite yet. She went up to her room and realised again with a relief, for which she hated herself, since the price of it was the ending of most that had made life a joy to Kitty, that one load had fallen from her for ever. There was no more dread of discovery. The worst had happened; but still dazed by the memory of that awful interview, she closed the door and looked round, then went to the windows and drew the blue curtains together so that the light was soft and dim. There was a sofa, with blue silk cushions at the foot of the bed; she dragged herself to it and lay down, and was very still.

Presently there was a tap. She had no courage to answer it—another tap—the door was opened gently, and in an undertone Kitty said—"Dearest?"

Then she raised herself and tried to make her voice steady. "I want you," she said.

Kitty shut the door and went up to the sofa. "Is anything the matter?" she asked. Her mother took the tender hands and pulled her down so that they were sitting side by side.

Through the dusky light Kitty could see an ashen-white face and two grave, compassionate eyes. "Dear-

est," she said again, beginning to be frightened, "what is it? Has anything happened to Harry?"

"No. He is in Paris, I suppose—but—I can't bear to tell you——" She gripped the little hands tightly.

"But you must, mother; tell me quickly."

"Kitty dear—your engagement will have to be broken off."

"Broken off! Is it something Harry has done?"

"You said yesterday it would kill you—but it won't, it won't."

"Broken off?" She couldn't take it in. "Something must have happened after we left—what is it?"

"I can't tell you."

"But you must, mother dear, you must. I have a right to know." It was a woman's voice, not a girl's. She shook her head, as if to be sure that she was awake, and repeated, "You must tell me."

"You have trusted me all your life; you must do so now——"

"Mother, you will drive me mad—what do you mean? Broken off! Is it something Harry has done?"

"No."

"Or Sir George—has he done anything?"

"No; but he said to-day that it was impossible."

Kitty waited a moment, too bewildered to speak. Then she drew her hands away and stood up. "This is a thing I must be told—you are not treating me fairly," she said. "I am not a child—I am engaged to Harry—you *must* tell me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because of a promise I gave your father."

"My father!"—it was astounding, "does Sir George know it."

"Yes."

"And Harry?"

"No, not yet." Another pause.

Then in a desperate voice. "Mother, you must tell me. You have no right to keep it from me."

Mrs. Roberts hid her face on the sofa-head for a moment. "I can't tell you." There was silence for a moment before she turned and looked at Kitty again. "Dear, I want you to understand—that—you—must trust me. I can't help it; you may know later, but I can't—can't tell you. I should break a solemn promise."

"What did Sir George say when he knew?"

"He said the marriage was impossible. He could never allow it—that"—the words were wrung from her—"he would rather see Harry in his grave." It was better to say it; it would show how impossible it had become.

Kitty had risen; she swayed for a moment as if she were going to fall, then by a great effort recovered. "It is nothing to do with Harry's own self?"

"I've told you already—nothing. You will hear from him—I suppose. Sir George is writing. I implore you to trust me. I love you more than anything in the world—I've tried to prevent this coming—all these years."

Kitty put her hands to her head. "All these years—then you have known. I can't feel anything—I'm dazed, I think. I can't believe that I'm alive or awake—to hear this." She waited a moment. "It can't be true—I shall go and write to Harry at once."

"No; wait for his letter."

"But if it is true—if it is all over——"

Then the mother put in her own plea. "We've been together, all the years, you and I—I've lived for you and loved you—you only in the world since—your father died. We shall be together still, and we'll go away, right away—there are other things in life besides happiness. You will come to see it—you will indeed."

"But I can't believe it is true," came from the girl's lips. "I know what you mean about other things, but it's Harry I want——" she broke off. "What can I do? I'll wait for his letter. Oh, poor darling, you are suffering too, I know that." She knelt and put out her arms and rested her head on her mother's shoulder—and thus they stayed in silence for a minute.

Then there was the sound of the lunch gong. Kitty shivered. "I can't go down just yet," she whispered. "What are we to do?"

Mrs. Roberts thought for a minute. "Lie still here," she said. "I'll go and say you have a headache."

"Yes, do, mummy dear." The old childish word came without her knowing; it was years since she had used it.

"Harry will put it right," she told herself when she was left alone in the dim room. "It's something they don't understand, mother and Sir George, but Harry will put it right." It was so strange that she wasn't heart-broken—but it wasn't true—she only felt stunned—it wasn't true—that was why it refused to smite her.

Miss Bateson was elated at seeing her guest again. "Why, Mrs. Roberts," she said, "I have missed you—can't tell you how much I've missed you. It was lovely

to see Harry and Kitty last night, and Mr. Wendover, he dined here too, and Darragh; all four of them—but you're looking ill. Why, what's the matter? Your lips are trembling and you are like a sheet; you must have some wine. I expect you haven't got used to trains, even yet."

Bogey filled Mrs. Roberts's glass. It brought a little colour back to her face. "Where is Mr. Bateson?" she asked.

"I don't know. But he wants us to dine with him to-night and go on to a play, just as we did with Mr. Saxton. Says he wants to make up to Kitty for being a grass widow. He just loves that girl, and he knows well enough he won't get a look in when Harry comes back. Now, isn't he artful?"

Her listener's eyes turned in the direction of Bogey.

"Think you can go," Miss Bateson said to him.

He looked round solemnly, put the claret jug on the table, and shuffled away.

They were silent for a moment. Then Helen held out her hand. "I want to tell you something," she said. "You will have to know it, and you've been so kind. Kitty is not going to marry Harry Kerriston—it's broken off."

"But they've not had time," Miss Bateson answered, taken aback at the suddenness of it. "Why, only last night we saw him off. He kissed his hand to her—last minute out of window."

"It is nothing that he has done. I don't want to speak about it, if you don't mind, dear Miss Bateson."

The dreary entreaty went to the kind little woman's heart. "I won't," she said. "I expect it will just smooth over and be all right again."

"No. It is utterly impossible. I want you to accept that fact—everything is at an end—and not to ask her or me about it."

Miss Bateson stared at her for a moment stupefied. Then she remembered Mr. Saxton's manner when he first came to see her in England, and his remark, "I wonder how Sir George will take it," and felt certain that the key to the mystery lay there. "I wouldn't ask you a thing for the world," she said. "But I just can't bear to think it's true. But if it is, you will have to let me help you any way I can. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you—or that Darragh wouldn't." She was silent for a moment. "Think you'd better tell her I know; it will make it easier——"

The door opened, and Kitty entered. She looked pale and a little dazed still, but quite composed. She had thought it over, and couldn't really believe in any tragedy verifying itself while Harry lived, and they loved each other. There was only a breathless time to wait.

"I'm sorry to be late," she said to Miss Bateson, "but I'm not hungry. Have you told mother what Mr. Bateson wants to do to-night?"

"Why, yes; but I didn't know whether we'd carry it out."

"Oh, yes, of course we will." She looked across at her mother. The fighting power had come to Kitty too. "I wonder if I might have the cart and the trotting pony this afternoon?" she asked Miss Bateson and smiled, for she remembered the afternoon she had first heard of it. "I should so like to drive myself somewhere alone—without even mother." She looked across again to soften the words. "I want to go through the streets—the ugly streets beyond Westminster—and think

about Mr. Bateson's scheme and the things we talked about last night." Darragh and Harry, between them, had taught her to drive; she had taken the reins of the dog-cart at Highwoods once or twice, and been proud of it.

"Why, yes; but won't you let Bogey go with you? You might like to have tea somewhere, and he'd look after the cart. I know what girls are; they think it fine to do a little thing like that on their own sometimes." Miss Bateson was being tactful.

So Kitty drove away half an hour later, with Bogey's faithful eyes keeping a sharp lookout, for the London traffic had to be threaded before she could get to quiet thoroughfares beyond.

"Mother," she had said, as she went off, "we will go on. We won't give in—I mean if it's really true. Life has to be lived, you know. Darragh said last night"—she called him Darragh behind his back—"that was what we always had to remember: that we'd no business to worry people with our private affairs. That's why I want to think it out alone—in case it comes true. And if it does, let us go away at once. Not back to Cannero," she added quickly, as if she divined what had been in her mother's thoughts. "I couldn't go there again; but I couldn't stay in England, just as once you couldn't. I see now that one has to find out things that will help. You will want to be helped too, dearest. I think the best thing to do would be to go far away from every place we have ever seen."

"We will," Mrs. Roberts answered. "We'll go to the end of the world." And for answer Kitty kissed her, and smiled at Bogey, who was waiting.

"Tell you what," Miss Bateson said, as she watched

the trotting pony start. "A governess cart is the most shaky thing I know—always seems to mistake itself for something that is bound to rattle for its living. But Kitty's fine. Why, her face is like chalk, and I saw her stagger against the doorpost as she went out, but she wasn't going to let us see. The best thing she could do was to go off like that. I am proud of her, and Darragh will be too."

"Darragh?"

"You'll have to let me tell him, or he'll be making jokes about Harry or doing something. I'll answer for his not taking any notice of it to her."

"Yes, he had better know." It was evident that Mrs. Roberts had no hope at all of things ever coming right again: it confirmed Miss Bateson's suspicions.

So Darragh was told. "You mean it!" he exclaimed, and rose to his feet. He and his sister were alone of course. "You mean it—and Sir George has done it—and you think it is because of something her father did? Makes it worse still. Why, he must be an old jackass!"

"He isn't old—don't believe he's fifty-five."

He considered for a minute. "Well, but he doesn't do anything, doesn't fill up his life enough, so he's warped. He ought to go about and see things from all sides. Nothing is so ageing or so narrowing as not doing enough. Why, he just goes up and down between that place—Leafield, or Highwoods, or whatever it is called—and London, as if it were a ropewalk."

"Nonsense, Darragh, he went out to Cannero."

"Well, that was a fluke. It's wonderful how many things get done by flukes. As a rule he does nothing but potter round. I made that out clearly enough. Perhaps that's why his neck's grown so thin—rather

reminds me of a fowl that's been dead since the day before yesterday. If people want to keep themselves going in the world they ought to crowd as much as they can into life. Then time doesn't get a chance of setting so many marks on them, and they don't grow stupid or narrow, or do what he's doing."

"Think you're right, Darragh—in a way. I feel it too, and mean to give up this house soon and go round again. I am restless, though I don't feel older than I did five years ago. But I want to talk about Kitty."

"Well, if that old jackass has broken with that girl for something her father did, he's just one-eyed, and wants his race to be one-eyed after him. But it shows the immortality of human action, and no one can tell where precisely it will hang on. Don't believe anything her father did will ever touch her main character. Her bringing-up has arranged that. But it's going to upset her life for a bit; that's where it comes in for her."

"I believe we'll have to take them right away——"

"Right away, to places where the people are near the earth; for the earth is kind—lets all tread on it living, shelters all alike in it dead." His voice grew absent, a light came to his eyes, he went near to her, his voice was like music. "Sister," he said, "maybe some day I'll get her, I'll get her! If I do, I'll build cities, I'll raise a new world. I'll plant great prairies, and grow a harvest for all to reap. I'll spend every pound as she pleases, if I may hold her hand to do it. I love that girl, I love her; and I'd feel as if I were going up steps made of stars to heaven if I might marry her."

"Don't believe you will, Darragh," Miss Bateson answered calmly; "but just go on and wait. It isn't

love one gets but love one gives that's best, so it won't hurt you to care, but just the other way. She stopped and looked at him for a moment. "But you do talk nonsense," she said affectionately. "I believe you've been reading Walt Whitman and want to feel like him—but it'll take a good deal of doing before you get even quarter-way on."

"Read him long ago, but I don't remember much; it isn't that. Besides, the world's where it was, and people go on feeling the same things over and over again, though only a few put them down. I shouldn't wonder if there's some undiscovered plane or strange dimension in which thoughts meet each other and make a currency of their own, though the thinkers are dead or far apart, for it's wonderful how the same things crop up again and again in different parts of the world——" He broke off, and went a step forward. "My! sister, but if I could get that girl!"

"Don't believe you will, Darragh. Don't set your heart on it."

He waited a moment before he answered: "Well, I love her anyhow; it's a great deal—it helps."

CHAPTER XXV

SIR GEORGE's letter to his son was short and peremptory. It stated that the marriage had become impossible owing to a discovery he had made regarding the family. He was careful not to say what it was in writing, for he was anxious to keep his promise to Mrs. Roberts. He was extremely angry, and determined to have no further communication with her; but he was sorry for Kitty, and quite saw that it would be merciful not to tell her the real reason of the break.

The result was a telegram from Harry to say that he was returning immediately. Sir George awaited him at the flat in Victoria Street, and gave him the details of his interview with Mrs. Roberts.

"But, my dear father, you don't seem to know much about it yet—how it was done, or why, or what for."

"She told me that he was tried, convicted, and died in prison."

Harry sat down with a grave face. He had unconsciously his father's own desire, even demand, that a "clean slate" should be the possession of every one with whom he was brought into close relation—or any relation at all, for the matter of that—"a clean slate and a clear outlook, and even the devil cannot work as much havoc as he pleases with one's life," he had said to himself once in a difficulty of his own, and it had carried him through. But he was a fair and generous man; if he had assimilated some of his father's notions, he had not yet taken account of them, or

brought them into workaday use. "How did you first get wind of this business?" he asked.

"Mrs. Wrenford recognised her."

"Then why on earth didn't she speak out before, and while I was there?" He got up and stood by the fireplace. "There's something wrong with that woman. I'll bet you anything you like on it. As for Kitty—I shall marry her just the same." He had thought it out and made up his mind.

"If you marry the daughter of a man with that history, I'll never see you again nor give you a penny." Sir George's temper was rising, though it was kept within bounds by the firmness in his son's voice.

"But you don't know what the history is yet, nor the extenuating circumstances. He may have done it with some praiseworthy object—been a scapegoat—all sorts of things."

"It's impossible, from the manner in which she spoke of his conviction; besides, Mrs. Wrenford knows the whole story."

"Anyhow, Kitty hasn't been convicted of anything."

"She may be—with that parentage."

Harry made an impatient movement. Then, as if he were sorry: "My dear father, you are a fanatic, you must forgive me for saying it, and your ideas are old-fashioned. The survival of the fittest is all right, and takes care of itself; but as for heredity, we've gone past it—found out that environment generally sets it right, rescues us; if it didn't we should all be savages still. Wendover says he believes there are very few of us who are not unconvicted criminals in some form, and perhaps all the better for it. I shouldn't wonder if he's right, and the daring that Kitty's father put into the—

er—whatever it was he did may have descended to her in the shape of courage—will help her to fight a burglar or save some one from drowning—well, that sort of thing.” He thought this a rather tactful argument; but Sir George would not be soothed.

“I told Mrs. Roberts I would rather see you in your grave than married to Kitty.”

“Now, my dear governor, you know that’s a whopper. You wouldn’t.” The manner in which he said it made Sir George look up at him gratefully. “I shall go round and see Kitty at once. Depend upon it, when I come back the whole thing will be cleared up.”

“You had much better stay away.”

“That’s utterly impossible,” Harry answered quickly.

His father saw that it would be useless to oppose him. He was beginning to feel that things were being taken out of his hands. “Kitty knows nothing about her father’s crime,” he said. “She has never been told.”

“Poor little darling. And she used to think him such a hero. But why does she suppose it’s all off?”

“I left that to the mother—she has said what she pleased. It was she who begged that Kitty might be kept in ignorance.”

“Oh, well, perhaps I’d better see Mrs. Roberts first. I’ll go at once—I can’t wait. And look here, governor, I want to make you understand one thing—I’m not a sentimental ass, and I am not quite a boy any longer, but if the whole thing has to be chucked it’ll cut me up pretty roughly.”

“I know it.” Sir George shook his hand. “But there are things we have to do, no matter how much they hurt. I am afraid you’ll find that—that this gives occasion for one of them.”

But Harry thought differently. To him, as to Kitty, as yet the rupture was simply a bewilderment—a little melodrama got up by the elders, to which the younger had no intention of giving in. It was astounding and worrying, of course, but it was bound to come right—it would be the deuce if it didn't, for he was extremely fond of his father, and to fly in the face of even what he considered his antiquated ideas would trouble him a good deal. On the other hand, he was very much in love, and he had not the least intention of giving up Kitty if she stuck by him; and of course she would. He was certain of that; quite certain—as certain as that she was sweet of heart and pure of soul. All this went swiftly through his brain as he drove to Berkeley Square.

Bogey gave a long grin of relief when he answered the door. He had divined that something had gone wrong, and imagined that the arrival of Harry would set it right. "Mrs. Roberts in there," he said in his laconic fashion, pointing to the morning-room. "Miss Kitty upstairs."

Harry strode across the hall without waiting to be announced, and walked in.

The sunshine flooded the room, the chintzes seemed fresher than ever—the roses in the pattern of them almost jumped at him; there were masses of very green maidenhair fern and pink carnations in the window-recesses; a faint odour of flowers was in the air. Mrs. Roberts was sitting near the window, sewing at the piece of blue silk he remembered seeing at Highwoods. He noticed that her face was very pale—it looked weary and drawn. She rose and looked at him doubtfully. He saw the blueness of her eyes and the soft-

ness of her fair hair; her whole personality seemed to remember the interior of a church—or to long for it. He went to her quickly. "You knew I should come?" He lifted her hands and kissed them. "I'm so sorry—I'm so awfully sorry. I pelted back directly I had his letter." Still holding her hands he sat down near her. He had loved her from the moment he first set eyes on her in the little room at Cannero, he did now.

And she did him. He looked handsomer than ever, she thought—straight and manly and clean-souled. There could never be any one else in the world for Kitty.

"Dear Harry, it's just like you," she said.

"And I know it's all some ghastly mistake, but now we're going to set it right."

"It isn't any mistake." She waited a moment before she went on. "It's why I telegraphed for Kitty from Andermatt—why I could scarcely speak when I first saw you at Cannero; but you were already engaged to her. If you'd only been older, or less happy, I might have told you at once. I meant to tell your father. I thought it wouldn't matter if he knew—that it wouldn't hurt him so much as it would you. And then"—she repeated Sir George's words that first afternoon, about an unblemished name—"and I felt I would rather die, or commit any crime, than tell him a thing that would upset your two lives. It has been all my fault, not Kitty's, that you were not told. She doesn't know even now."

"She'll have to."

She shook her head. "No."

"She must." He held her hands a little tighter. His manner was very sweet to her, and kind, but firm.

She recognised that she had to deal with a man and not a boy. If she had only seen it before, she might have been saved all this. "But first," he went on gently, "you must bring yourself to tell me the details. I am in the dark till I know them."

She waited a minute, then drew her hands away and stood a little distance from him, as if to leave him a clear mind to judge her fairly. "He said that we were to go away and not even to call ourselves by his name," she added, when she had told him the story. She stopped a full minute—and he was silent too—before she went on. "I have always believed in the beauty of the world, and thought that if we remained ignorant of some things—those things we could do no good to any one by knowing, that were better left behind, forgotten—perhaps the past happiness would come stealing back—the happiness that was in the world before so many cruel things had happened, that perhaps they would die out, and the world get back its firstness. Think what Kitty would have suffered by knowing!" She shuddered with the dread of it even now.

"Dearest," he said, just as Kitty did, "we have to accept the facts as they are, and to do our best with them; that's why it's better for those who have thought, or are concerned, to know even the worst, so that they may grapple with them. It's no good trying to edit the whole world—to whitewash it over; it can't be done. One must deal with things that are terrible but true, not refuse to realise that they exist. You have had so little experience of the world. You only dreamt about it at Cannero, lived at the gate of it—and shut it on the things that frightened you."

"I know it all seems foolish to you, but it's my defence—my justification for not telling you. And for Kitty I'd no choice—the promise made me silent to her." A forlorn tear came to her eyes and wandered down the thin face. He felt his heart reach out to her.

"I know you did it for Kitty," he answered; "I quite understand. But now you must tell her. This promise was asked of you and given when neither of you were in a natural state of mind—under conditions that could never have been foreseen and considered. It has been a vampire to your peace."

"I know—I know," and, half ashamed, she added, "I felt a sense of relief even at your father knowing, though I knew what it would do."

"It is not going to do anything very dreadful." He smiled to reassure her. "The person you have been unfair to is Kitty's father."

She looked up. "To him?"

"You have misjudged him; for—being all that you say he was—he wouldn't have expected you to keep this promise under the conditions that have arisen. Give him credit for being wide and generous and kind. Do you see, dear?"

She nodded again for answer. He put an arm round her and led her to the door, to the foot of the stairs.

"Go up and tell Kitty," he said, "and ask her to come down to me. Tell her now. We're going to get it all over—make her come at once, directly she knows. I shall champ till she does." He tried to say it gaily, but there was misgiving at his heart.

The minutes he waited—they might have been fifteen or twenty—were like hours to him. He didn't like the

story. The father seemed to have been a good chap enough, but he had evidently been mixed up with the wrong set of people and led away. He remembered a certain set that he had been nearly getting into at Oxford. He had kept clear of it with difficulty, and once nearly made a fool of himself. That was why this thing didn't affect him as it did his father. Besides, he saw more clearly, he thought, with a little forgivable egotism, and knew that, except for the pain it had given them all, it wouldn't matter; but he wished it had been different. However, it couldn't be helped now. They would ignore it, forget it, following out Mrs. Roberts's programme—perhaps, when you came to think of it, it was rather a fine one. Anyhow, neither she nor Kitty should be allowed to remember all that had brought about this unfortunate crisis.

Then the door opened and Kitty entered. She stood with her back against it as her mother had done at Highwoods during the interview with Mrs. Wrenford. He went forward to take her in his arms, but she held out her hands to keep him off. He drew back and waited. Her eyes were shining, there were two spots of colour on her cheeks. She stood proud and erect, though she seemed to be wrestling with pain that was almost an agony, and only kept in bounds by sheer force of will.

"Mother has told me. You know, of course, that I never dreamt of anything of the sort. Oh, it's too dreadful for words."

"But it's not your fault, dearest."

"Things are often not one's fault, but that doesn't undo them. Mother made me come down. I thought it would be better not even to see you again——"

"Look here, it's stunned you, darling. It's going to be all right." He was aghast.

"No, it isn't," she said. "Mother told me how splendid you'd been, and I love you for it; but you wouldn't have let yourself love me if you had known beforehand, and I'm much too wise, too proud, to take advantage——"

"Advantage—nonsense." But for the life of him he couldn't go up to her and kiss away this humour as he wanted to do; something in her voice frightened him and kept him rooted at the distance from which he stood staring at her.

"When the mare cast that shoe last Saturday, and we went back and listened to their argument outside the window, do you remember what Sir George said about the builder's daughter inheriting her father's—oh, I don't know what to call it—his nature perhaps? He said that she might be extravagant and run up bills——"

"Quite right. I've just flung his own argument at his head, and said your father's daring might come to you in another form—in the form of courage, and help you fight a burglar or something of that sort." He was unnerved, and getting a little incoherent. "You don't know which way things will run. Why shouldn't they run for good?"

"I'm not going to risk it—for you." She went on quickly, "Whatever my father did, I know and feel that it wasn't himself who did it, but some dreadful suggestion that leaped into him."

"I know; suggestions do—they have done it to me—they do to every one."

"He was good and dear and everything—except for

that one time. And I don't care what he did—I'm glad I'm his and hers."

One part of her father's history had, of course, remained untold. No torture would have wrung a confession of it from his wife to his child.

"Well, then, it's all right?" He went forward.

She shook her head and put out her hands to keep him off.

"But why not? And what is going to happen? Why are you like this?"

"Because everything is at an end."

"Why on earth should everything be at an end?"

"Do you think that with the feelings and theories your father has—and perhaps you have inherited them—I would let you marry me? Oh, I couldn't—couldn't."

"Darling child, for God's sake don't be so idiotic. You know I adore you—we'll forget all about it."

"You will never forget—you never could—and I never shall. And even if you did, do you think I could let you marry me after what your father said—that he would rather see you in your grave than married to me?"

"Oh, damn my grave!" he said under his breath. "He didn't mean it, and I told him it was a whopper. Now, what do you say?"

"He did mean it," she answered bitterly. "And it's no good—I'm not going to do it."

"Well!" he gasped in astonishment. "But you shall, you darling."

"No, I cannot. You mustn't think I have no character, no will of my own——"

"Good Lord, my dear, I don't. But if you persist

In this, I shall think you're behaving pretty badly to me."

"No, I'm not. I'm doing the only thing to keep my own self-respect. It isn't because I don't love you; you know that I do—but I won't marry you—I simply won't. I told mother so, and we are going to do the only thing possible."

"Oh," he said, still staring at her. "Well, of all the——" He stopped. "What will you do?"

"We shall go away. I told mother yesterday that we would, if it came true—if it was something that couldn't be set right. I didn't think it was. I didn't think it would be about—about my father," she faltered. "We shall go right away—we shall never see each other again. The penalty has to be paid—we heard him say it—it shall be paid."

"Look here, Kitty, do you mean this? You are busting up both our lives for a reason that is absurd." He felt as if his head were against a brick wall—as if some avenging angel had taken possession of the girl before him.

"No, I'm not. Happiness isn't everything—mother said that."

"Oh, yes," impatiently, "our people say far too many moral and high-falutin' things—both of them."

He was getting angry. "Look here, you mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it," she said doggedly.

"Very well—I'm going."

"I want you to go," she gasped. "It's better."

"Good-bye, then. You'll kiss me?"

He took her in his arms and kissed her with all his heart and soul, then walked away from the house half

blinded, hardly knowing what he was doing. But he had not the least intention of giving her up.

Kitty sat down exhausted, her heart beating, a choking feeling in her throat. She had no energy to crawl upstairs again. And she wanted to be alone. The revelation concerning her father had upset every conception of her life—all her dreams and imaginings concerning him—though already, as her speech to Harry betrayed, she had begun to see how it might have happened. The contemplative life at Cannero had put more into her than, judging from her simple manner, the casual observer might have supposed. She felt that marrying into the Kerriston family had become an utter impossibility now that she knew her own history. Harry? There was no one in the world like him. By-and-by she might break her heart for him, but at present she only felt a shrinking from all she had looked forward to for happiness—a dogged, obstinate pride; and after this there came an overwhelming tenderness for her mother. She understood now the aloofness, the silence, the scared look that had sometimes come to the eyes—everything.

Bogey opened the door and shuffled in. "There's Mr. Saxton," he said.

She started from the chair. "Oh, I can't—" she began. But Mr. Saxton had entered, awkward and apologetic, a faint smile on his face over which the pink colour had spread as he heard the dismay in her tone. It was too late to retreat. He saw at once that something was the matter, for her hair was dishevelled, the expression of her face half frightened; she seemed uncertain what to do—she looked older and different. In a moment he understood: he had expected it.

"I'll go away," he said. "I ought to have waited to hear if you would see me."

"Oh, no—come in." Perhaps it would be better to talk to him a little while, she thought; it would force control on her.

He came further into the room, looked round for a chair that was to his satisfaction, and sat down ponderously. "Are you busy?" he asked.

"No, I'm not busy."

"I was afraid something was the matter."

"No—yes; something is the matter." Everybody had better know as soon as possible, she thought. "You are such an old friend, I think I ought to tell you. My engagement is broken off."

He looked up. "Broken off?" He waited a minute, and then added, "That's why you are—upset?"

"Yes, that's why I am upset."

"I am sorry." He searched for words that would convey his sympathy for her, but he had little power of expression. "You mustn't let it make you unhappy," he said, after a moment.

"No." Every word was an effort, but she held her head up bravely. "It can't be helped. It can never come right. I know you are sorry, but I can't talk of it."

"Tell me what you are going to do? You won't want to stay here now?"

She shook her head.

"You had better come to Dunster—both of you."

She shook her head again.

"Why not?" His face grew still more pink.

"I want to go very far away, and mother will, I know. Thousands and thousands of miles."

"I wish you would come to me," he said desperately.

"You would be safe then." She looked up; it was the word her mother had used. "I wouldn't worry you. You should do as you liked, you and your mother together." It escaped him; it was said quietly but inevitably, as if he had lost control of the slow, grinding machine that gave out his words.

She looked at him, half frightened, wondering in what sense he meant it. "Mr. Saxton"—she hardly knew that the words were coming, they seemed to be dictated by some strange consciousness of which she was not aware—"do you know why it is broken off?"

"No." He shifted uneasily on his chair; she felt that he was prevaricating.

"You went to Levanto. Mother was there when she was a little girl."

"But that was a long time ago; and Godstone, whom I went to see, was away. The hotel was empty. The place was empty. It was very dull." He brought out each sentence deliberately, and waited a minute before he added, "Dunster is much better, the country there would please you."

"Yes——"

"The hunting will begin next month; you had better come."

"I can't."

He looked at her again; the colour deepened on his face. "You can, whenever you like; nothing will make any difference." He got up to go, she noticed that his eyes avoided hers, he hardly touched the hand she held out. But she knew that he would remain there—in the background of her life, an alternative if ever despair or desperation took her to it.

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CHAPTER XXVI

SIR GEORGE spent a week alone at Highwoods—a long, dragging week.

Lady Culworthy had departed two days after the rupture. She had, of course, been informed of the whole situation, and felt as clearly as her brother did the undesirableness—virtually the impossibility—of the marriage, but she had liked Mrs. Roberts and Kitty as much as he had done, and was desperately sorry for them. The result had been a kind, womanly letter despatched just before she left Highwoods. Sir George, who knew of it, had asked her to tell him if an answer came. He was uneasy, and found it hard work to keep his anger up to the high-water mark, though his convictions were as strong as ever. Kitty's attitude had softened him a good deal. "She has spirit," he said to himself; "if she had chosen, I believe she could have made Harry marry her, or at any rate spend his life waiting for her. She has more grit than I gave her credit for; but it would have been a pity—though he'll never find such a charming girl again."

He took a lonely walk in the forest and thought it out again, and tried hard to be stern; but sentiment threatened to overtake him at the pool by which he and Mrs. Roberts had lingered. He did his best to fight it off, turning his head uneasily, easing his collar, and knitting his brows; but the whisking of a rabbit in the thicket was too much for him. He remembered how she had laughed and looked after one. "She is a

delightful woman," he said reluctantly, "it makes it all the greater pity." He turned back, and walked slowly home. The way had seemed very short that morning with her; it was much longer now.

The second post had arrived while he was out; a pile of letters awaited him on the hall table. The handwriting on the top one made him wince; it was from Mrs. Wrenford.

"O dear Sir George," it ran, "will you ever forgive me? I did it for the best; I did indeed. When you can, send one little line."

That was all. He tore it into very small pieces and threw it angrily at the waste-paper basket; the fragments fell outside it to the floor. He picked them up, forgetting the rest of his letters for the moment. "I'm unreasonably harsh to her," he said; "for after all she did what was perfectly right, only she ought to have done it before. It's her venom towards Mrs. Roberts that was so cruel, and I don't understand it—unless it's jealousy. . . . I'm sure that I didn't mislead her, didn't give her some cause to think that I regarded her more—more seriously than I did." He sat down on a chair beneath a portrait of his great-grandfather in uniform, faded and yellow, planted his feet on the tiger skin stretched out before it, and wondered and was not wholly displeased at wondering whether this accounted for her attitude. "She must have seen how much I admired Mrs. Roberts," he thought. "Jealousy is a madness, and, poor woman, if she—if she had a sincere regard for me," a little smile came to his lips, "she's not so very much to blame, after all. She has a vehement, passionate nature, and it's very unfortunate if, without meaning it, I encouraged her." Then

suddenly, as if it had been held up before him, he saw the Maltese cross of diamonds. It dismayed him; for it was he who had given it her during that time in Paris of which she had reminded him, and on a generous impulse that he had often vaguely regretted lest, if she were indiscreet enough to tell any one it had been his gift, a wrong construction should be put on it. He felt aghast as he thought of it now, and yet the whole thing had been innocent enough. Passing through Paris, on his way to a Swiss cure, he had heard by accident that she was staying in a shabby hotel in the Rue St. Hyacinthe. He called on her out of politeness. She looked a little tired, and was dressed in becoming half-mourning; she seemed touched by his kindness; they had a talk in quiet tones, as became her garments. There was a tone in her voice, and a reticence that he thought admirable, when she confided to him the fact that her husband had misunderstood her, had never given her sympathy, and that the smallness of the income he had left her, considering his fairly considerable wealth, had been a form of posthumous spite. She made him realise that she felt rather than owned it. She told him that she was very lonely in Paris, "lost in the great gay city." He thought it a pathetic situation for so attractive a woman, and was anxious to do what he could. He wondered if a drive in the Bois would cheer her up; she accepted it gratefully. He suggested some amusement the next evening; that they might go to the Française, dining first at Meurice's—he was staying there. She thanked him charmingly, and refrained from even hinting at a vastly different programme.

"Let us be very frivolous," she said the morning

after that blameless entertainment, "and go and look at the shops in the Rue de la Paix. There are such artistic things—the workmanship makes us envious for our countrymen," she added when he hesitated. The point of view interested him; in a few moments he found himself lingering before jewellers' windows. The Maltese cross was in one of them; she fastened her eyes upon it, and then looked up at him. "I am quite sad sometimes when I remember how few ornaments I have," she said. "It makes me feel as if I'd had no lovers, no friends, no one in the world who cared for me."

"Didn't your husband give you any?"

"He had no imagination; men are so different, so strange. They don't realise that women love ministrations that seem to be the natural expression of the stronger sex to the weaker; that is why they long for flowers and bonbons and jewels, not because they're greedy or vain, but because they show the thoughtfulness, the tenderness of a generous nature, or perhaps," she added in a low voice, "of a great soul."

He was surprised. "Dear me! that never occurred to me before. I shall remember it."

They turned away, then he hesitated. He remembered a thousand he had made unexpectedly over an investment. Why shouldn't he give some one else a happy surprise too? This poor lady had not had many in her life—he felt certain of it. It was all done on an impulse—the outcome of the little reckless feeling that any man may feel at some time, even for a woman in whom he takes no particular interest.

"Let me present you with that cross," he said, not tenderly, but in a pleasant and formal voice. "You

like it, and it would give me great pleasure if you would accept it."

"Oh, no." She was almost frightened. "Dear Sir George, you are much too generous, you must think of your boy."

"I am not likely to forget him." He answered firm and positive, as he held a man should be, but with a little smile.

She followed him very meekly into the jeweller's.

"I was extremely foolish," he said severely to himself that morning at Highwoods as he sat thinking it over with his yellowing ancestor looking down on him, "but I'd not the least intention of anything more than to give pleasure to an agreeable woman—an old friend who was at—at rather a sad time of her life. I'm afraid I shall have to explain this to her—it will be awkward, very awkward indeed." The sunshine came in at the door, a draught of gold to the shade; he followed it till it touched the table on which the rest of his letters were waiting, still unread. He rose quickly and went to them. "Good Heavens, there is one from Elizabeth." He opened it eagerly; perhaps she had heard from Mrs. Roberts. He shook Mrs. Wrenford from his thoughts as if he felt it a desecration that she should linger in them—while perhaps he was about to get tidings of the other women. Yes, his sister had heard:—"She tells me they are going away almost immediately with the American woman and her brother to the Western States; and will not return for years, perhaps never."

Going away for years! He put the letter into his pocket, crossed the hall quickly and rang the bell.

"Tell Johnson I want the dog-cart, I'm going up to London immediately." He had no definite reason for the sudden journey except that he couldn't stand High-woods alone any longer, and that it was a week since he had seen Harry, who had made an excuse for not appearing and had given no account of his doings. But this place was not to be borne with the knowledge of that departure looming—that journey across the wide seas to the undeveloped worlds of which Darragh had spoken. The remembrance of the fair woman who, with her eyes full of fright and her lips rigid, had given him that last little inclination of her head, and disappeared in the carriage down the drive never—never to come again, half-maddened him. She had been wrong, absolutely in the wrong, unfair, dishonourable even, but the main tragedy had not been her fault, and he had been too harsh to her—in fact, he had been brutal. Poor lady, what must she think of him. She had suffered a martyrdom—and he, for a pack of theories he struggled hard to uphold, but that against his will were breaking down—that were beginning to infuriate him—for the sake of these he had been cruel to her. "Duty is the hardest thing in the world sometimes," he said, and locked his lips and put determination into his gait as he stepped into the train; "but it has to be done." The statement failed to give him comfort.

It was a broiling hot day, late in July; London was getting empty. He drove from Paddington across the Park and noticed that there were fewer people than there had been a week ago; soon, he remembered with dismay, two more figures would have vanished, perhaps never to walk in it again. He dropped his luggage in

Victoria Street and went on to the Foreign Office; there would be just time to catch Harry.

They looked at each other blankly. "What have you been doing, you seem fagged?" Sir George asked. "Why didn't you come to Highwoods?"

"Oh, I'm all right. The chief took me for the week-end to Forest Row. Have you seen his place there?"

"No, he never invited me."

"It's on the edge of Ashdown Forest; there are some links, quite decent, but the chief is no good at them. Ida thinks she can play, but she was a nuisance."

The formal prefix to her name had vanished. Sir George noticed it, and remembered his former ambitions. "What do you think of her?" he asked.

Harry wrinkled up his brow; it was a new trick. "I don't think. She isn't a bad sort."

"Did you go to the forest?"

"Yes, when I could escape—sat on a fallen tree and smoked all Sunday morning while the family went to church; thought things out." He looked up with some animation. "I should like to chuck this and go away—to the other end of nowhere, or something of that sort."

"What for?" his father asked suspiciously, remembering Lady Culworthy's news.

"Change—come too, if you like. We might go to South Africa, round by the Cape to Australia, back by India. This would be a decent little jaunt and fill up the time till the spring. Perhaps I might find something more to do then—this isn't up to much."

"We'll do it—together, if you care to have me; or you shall go alone—which you prefer." He hesitated

before he asked: "Have you seen anything of them in Berkeley Square?"

"No. I sent Kitty a note and asked her to see me."

"What did she say?"

"Refused. I wish you had let my grave alone, Governor. She can't get over that speech—but it isn't that only," he added generously. "She's done with us. No matter how magnanimous you felt now it wouldn't be the least good. She's as proud as Lucifer—takes after her mother."

"Perhaps that's just as well." After all Sir George was determined to stand by his guns—though they blew him to bits. "Can you lunch with me?"

"I'm afraid I can't—but, look here, suppose you dine with me to-night at the Bachelor's. We might do a play afterwards, though they're all pretty rotten."

"I shall be proud—we will. Would you like to ask the Detners to the play and supper afterwards?" He was cultivating the wisdom of the serpent.

"It would be a bore, besides they're sure to be full up. Let's go alone."

Sir George considered a moment, wondering if Harry knew of the going to America project; but he had no courage to ask. "Poor chap, it's hit him hard, but he's taking it very well."

On the steps of the Athenæum he noticed vaguely that an old man, a stranger coming down them, stared at him and half turned back. The next minute Wendover appeared, evidently in a hurry. He pulled up and shook hands.

Sir George fancied that the deep-set eyes looked at him reproachfully. "You know of course——" he began.

"Oh, yes, of course—know all about it," Wendover said with an off-hand growl. "The dear woman was quite right according to her lights—but the lights were all wrong. Perhaps we'd better not discuss it."

"It has been a great shock——" Sir George began with determination.

"I'm sure of it. I'm afraid I can't stay now—leaving town in an hour's time, back the end of the week—see you then perhaps." He hailed a cab and hurried off. "Poor old buffalo! I expect he's rather sick of his own morality," he thought, "and doesn't know what to do with it next."

The buffalo, feeling somewhat sat upon, walked into the Athenæum. It was half-past one. He had not the least desire to lunch, but it was time. While he was hesitating, the old man who had stared at him returned. His face seemed familiar; yet he was a stranger, though of course a member. He was tall and very thin, his shoulders stooped and his clothes seemed to be hung upon them; his white hair was long and limp; his eyes had the worn look of a scholar, the dreamy one of an ascetic and idealist—but of an idealist different from Darragh Bateson, in that he was nearly at the end of the road along which the younger man was only starting; and while the one was freighted with visions and energy, the other had years ago brought his store of learning to it and was laden now with memories. A moment's doubt, then each held out a hand. A curiously different one; Sir George's was rather small, but had a vigorous grip to it—the older man's was long and thin and sensitive.

"Godstone!" Sir George exclaimed. "The very

man I've been hoping to hear from—why, how long is it since we met?"

"Nearly a quarter of a century;" a low voice, but infinitely sweet; it suggested the manner of life its owner had led. "I have come to London chiefly on your account."

"I thought you were at—what's the place called—Sestri Levante?"

"I live there, but the Italian coast is too hot at this time of year. Your letter reached me yesterday by the same post as one from that poor girl, which had been following me about for six weeks." He meant Mrs. Roberts, though Sir George thought it was Kitty. "I went to Honfleur two days ago and pitched my tent at a little hotel up on the Côte de Grace—a charming place for the summer. Do you know it?"

"Not at all," Sir George answered, too impatient to talk of any place on earth. "I'm content with England."

"Ah,—it's cool." It was the last thing his hearer would have called it. "Let's go somewhere and talk quietly."

"I haven't lunched yet. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. I have; but I'll come and look on."

They made their way to the dining-room and found an isolated table.

"Helen tells me," the old scholar began, "that your boy is engaged to her girl. She was the daughter, you know, of Geston, the English chaplain at Santa Maria?—I've known her since she was quite a child—a beautiful creature, every year of her life. We read Dante together when she was sixteen. She wrote to me a year ago and told me that Kitty had met some boy at An-

dermatt who appeared to be falling in love with her. I had no idea it was your son, and it hadn't occurred to her till then that her child was at a marriageable age. She asked my advice concerning her husband's history—what she was to do."

"What did you say?"

"I told her to be silent."

"You did—but in Heaven's name, why?"

"Kerriston," the old man said—his eyes were full of a strange light, spiritual and mysterious it seemed to the man on whom he bent them. "That is my theory and I taught it to Helen—the cleansing and regeneration of the whole world by trying to obliterate crime and wrongdoing, the misery and ugliness one can neither help nor lessen. I think gradually they would die out and the earth's beauty be left to make people happy—and that they would grow worthy of it."

"There's a good deal in continuity of thought," Sir George began, trying to show he was up to the mark. "Mrs. Roberts said almost the same thing to Harry as one of her reasons for silence."

"My teaching—my counsel," Godstone answered. "I'm not speaking of sorrow and pain, of anything we can help, of people we can comfort by having knowledge of their misery, but only of those things concerning which speech and knowledge will be useless and of which ignorance may possibly mean abstention."

But this was not at all the sort of discussion upon which Sir George wanted to enter. "For Heaven's sake go on about these people," he said, "you apparently don't know of the—the unfortunate complication that has occurred. It has proved most disastrous your telling her to be silent."

"I told her to be silent," Godstone repeated, "because it all happened so long ago; the story was dead and buried. I couldn't see why two innocent creatures should be shocked by a knowledge for which there was no necessity. It wasn't as if the father had been a scoundrel."

"You knew him?"

"Knew him? Of course I did; it was through me that she did—that he married her. I loved him, poor fellow."

"Who was he?"

Godstone turned and looked at him in surprise. "Why, Roycefield—you know?"

"Roycefield! Jack Roycefield?" Sir George stood up in astonishment. "Good God! I thought she was called Roberts."

"But she wrote me—" he broke off. "Look here, let us go to the library—it is usually empty at this hour—I can't talk of this matter across a tablecloth."

"Impossible—some stray bishop is certain to be about. The committee room might do, or stay—you forget after all these years—come to the sofa at the head of the staircase. It is the quietest place of all; many momentous things have been talked out there."

"I thought you knew," Godstone said, when they had seated themselves.

"Roycefield!" Sir George repeated. "I remember him as well as if I had seen him yesterday, though I only met him two or three times."

"I took him over to a dance your mother gave at Highwoods—he was in his second year at Oxford then—and everybody was delighted with him. He had a most singular charm."

"Of course, of course. And little Betty Seagrave fell in love with him—we teased her about him for months afterwards. I never dreamed that Mrs. Roberts was Roycefield's widow. I never heard that he was even married—but I was in India."

"But didn't you know? She wrote to me immediately after Kitty was engaged to your boy, and said that, because he was so young and they were so happy, she had made up her mind not to afflict them with the father's history—that was the way she put it—but to tell you. I thought she'd done so—it seemed to me the best way out of it."

"She meant to tell me—and I choked her off. She was afraid—women need so much kindness. Did you know Roycefield well?"

"Yes, well. And I knew all his people, though not intimately. I saw him constantly when he was at Magdalen. He was a wonderful creature, enthusiastic, impulsive, generous, and believed in every one. That fellow Norton got hold of him—do you remember Norton, a curious man with some sort of fascination too, who was no good and sent down? He had a cousin, a singularly beautiful girl. Jack became infatuated with her, but his people knew nothing of this; it was not the sort of thing they would have liked. The Nortons were people on the make, with an eye to the main chance and a hand always reached out to grab money"—Godstone shuddered—"they are the people who ruin the world for those who love it. She threw Jack over; I don't know much of that side of the story for I was abroad. Did you see him in London?"

"I was in India. My wife's brother Percival—who was killed at Khartoum—was devoted to him."

"Everybody was. But he was a man who lived in two worlds—one in which he stayed against his better judgment because of his infatuation for a woman who threw him over for a rich financier; the other was his own and adored him."

"But the catastrophe?"

"I don't know the details; it was a madness, an impulse. I suspect that a woman tempted him——"

Sir George turned quickly. "A woman?"

Godstone put up his thin hand; it was almost a reproof. His life had been so leisurely, so peaceful, he was not to be hurried now, and quick speech or movement made him retreat. "The girl who threw him over married—he took it badly and came out to me in Italy. He met Helen and then"—the old man looked up with a smile—"he saw the beautiful gates in the distance, and they opened for him. The father, the life, the whole thing appealed to all that was best in him. The true man came out, and worshipped her—but I've always thought," he added, in a childlike manner but with a curious wisdom, "that the lower side of his nature—we all have higher and lower sides, Kerriston, and they have to be taken into account, for unless they are evenly balanced in marriage it's a failure, one side is dissatisfied—the lower side of Jack's nature was distanced, kept at bay, and hungered with Helen. The fault was not with her, he never woke her; nor with him, he never thought her as human as she was, and the higher level is difficult to reach but easy to fall from——"

Sir George nodded. "Go on," he said.

"Geston gave up his chaplaincy and went back with them to England. He was taken ill on the way, and

hurried off to a cottage in Wales, where he lingered for nearly a year. Helen stayed and nursed him—her child was born there.”

“And Roycefield?”

“He was in London, but he went to them occasionally. She wrote to me sometimes and spoke of the books he sent her, the delicacies for her father, and his goodness. Geston had lost money and Roycefield was generosity itself—too generous. Norton got hold of him again, and he met the woman who had thrown him over. Her husband had gone to India—he had something to do with a group of mines out there——”

Sir George was startled. “What was his name?”

“Let me see—Wrenford.”

“Mrs. Wrenford!” He was astounded.

Godstone, who was not very observant, went on in his soft voice:

“I can’t tell you much more. I was abroad and didn’t get newspapers every day.”

“I read the account of the trial in India. There were a number of people implicated?”

Godstone nodded. “That was why it dragged on. Jack, happy-go-lucky and careless, was the scapegoat, and afterwards he was too generous to speak. I always thought it was Wrenford’s wife who persuaded him to bolt.”

“There was some woman, I remember, mixed up with the case—she followed him.”

“Mrs. Wrenford, of course. But she managed to keep her name out of it.”

“But didn’t Mrs. Roberts know her, or about her?”

“She knew that he had been infatuated with some one who had thrown him over. He told her that him-

self; but he told her as little as possible. She knew nothing about his life in London before or after his marriage; she didn't see him from the time of her father's death till she was sent for when he was dying in prison, a fortnight after his conviction. He told her to call herself Roberts." Godstone stopped for a moment. "I've always felt that the thing that stung her most was the fact that the other woman was mixed up with it, though she was too proud to mention it even to me—it's possible that she didn't know it, of course."

"They never met—the two women?"

"Never as far as I know. Mrs. Wrenford went off to India—I don't suppose the husband cared."

"She made up to us. I don't understand why she did that," Sir George said thoughtfully. Then he told Godstone of the part she had played at Highwoods.

"Jealousy," Godstone said. "It's a madness that is underrated, a many-headed monster." He stopped again.

Sir George waited impatiently, but he had discovered the unwisdom of interruptions.

"Tell me precisely why you broke it off—on what grounds, for it was not Kitty's fault, nor her mother's?"

Then, somewhat lamely, Sir George went over his theories; the material point of view he was ashamed to mention in the presence of this old man, who seemed full of worldly wisdom and the higher virtues of scholarship and simplicity, a combination that, together with his years, almost awed his listener.

"It's the strangest thing that any one should be afraid to let his son marry Jack's child and Helen's," he said.

"My dear Godstone, I'd no idea who she was."

"And you say she's in London? She wrote to me from Cannero."

"She's in Berkeley Square, five minutes off."

"I'll go to her at once. I wish I had known before." He looked at his watch. "There's not much time. I am going to Winchester by the four o'clock train from Waterloo—only for a couple of nights—they told me here that you were not in London or I would have arranged differently; but I must see Helen."

Sir George got up briskly. "Let us walk round together," he said.

"I shall leave her the copyright of my books," Godstone told him as they went along. "They'll be valuable some day—I invested my savings in publishing them."

"Ah, very good of you," his friend answered absently; "she'll value them, I'm sure."

Bogey shook his head. "Mrs. Roberts and Miss Kitty gone away—coming back to-morrow or some day."

"And Miss Bateson?" Sir George asked.

"She gone away too; come back to-morrow."

"At what time?"

Bogey shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps eleven o'clock, perhaps twelve o'clock, perhaps one o'clock." With which they had to be content

"I'll go back to the hotel," Godstone said, as they turned away. "The best ones are nearly all pulled down. I used to stay at Thomas's, but it's gone; luckily Brown's is left—I am there. I couldn't venture into the great barracks they've put up. I've heard about them—crowded with furniture and hundreds of people, known by a number; they sound like factories

in which the hands have grown lazy, or like vast institutions to which the followers of some strange religion of extravagance and luxury go to lose their identity.

Sir George blinked and looked up in surprise, but the far-off look was in the blue eyes and the voice had not changed its gentle tone. "A little mad, poor fellow," he thought. Then to his relief he found himself dismissed.

"I think I'll leave you," Godstone said at the corner of Albemarle Street, "I'm so accustomed to being alone—and I must remember the papers I was to collect and take with me to Winchester. Tell Helen if you see her that I shall return to London on Saturday and go to her immediately." He held out his hand with a warning look lest it should be gripped too hard; and so they parted.

CHAPTER XXVII

SIR GEORGE went straight to the Foreign office again, but Harry was not there. Nor was he to be found at Lord Detner's. Then feeling that he would like to think over the surprising news he had heard, he went to the flat.

It was past three. He felt utterly at a loose end—that he had made a fool of himself and behaved like a brute. He called himself both, though still his old convictions asserted themselves and told him that he was justified in what he had done. There were moments, even now, when he had his doubts about the marriage; he was ashamed of them when he remembered Godstone, but he felt that his consent to it would be an act of reparation, a proof of his affection for Harry and those concerned in it rather than of wisdom. After all, there had been the long scandal connected with the name. He meant to overlook it, but it would be magnanimous—yes, magnanimous; though not to overlook it would stamp him as narrow, almost cowardly. He never minced matters to himself any more than to others. The position wanted thinking out, of course. He wondered what front he could present to the world—how much it would be wise to say or not to say. Then the really fine side of him asserted itself. "What does it matter," he said with determination, "if one takes care of realities? Appearances are of very little consequence in the end—they right themselves." He sat down in the great arm-chair—it was so large that he looked like an island in it, though he was not a

very little man: the sitting-room in Victoria Street had been furnished with an eye to indolence and extreme comfort. "Jack Roycefield was a dear fellow, and suffered enough; and as for his wife—poor thing—" He looked at the window in the golden sunshine that did not reach to it but touched the distant roofs, while he thought of her. He remembered her hair and the flickering smile. It had subjugated him from the day that he saw her first. "I expect she'll have Wendover in the end, even if she isn't in love with him. He is evidently devoted to her, and when she finds that Kitty is happy she'll marry him, as a sort of burnt sacrifice. It's the kind of thing she would do. He's a fine fellow, too. Any woman might be fond of him." He went to a glass. "And a good deal younger than I am," he added regretfully.

The door opened, and Harry walked in. "I hear you've been pursuing me. Is anything the matter?"

He was a good deal the taller of the two, and his father looked up at him with pardonable pride, and thought that he didn't wonder at any girl being in love with him—and how happy Kitty would be.

"My dear Harry—my dear chap," he said, and grasped his hand, "I've good news for you—splendid news. It's going to be all right."

Harry was always calm, but his face lighted up. "All right? Why, what do you mean?"

"I've found out about the father." He poured out the story that Godstone had told him.

"It's a most extraordinary thing. Mrs. Roberts told me that she had taken a different name. I didn't ask what her real one was; but Roycefield wouldn't have enlightened me," Harry said.

"I don't suppose you ever heard it; you were only seven when it all happened. We were in India."

Harry considered for a moment. "But why should it make such a difference to you? After all, he did—what he did—was tried and convicted."

"I know." Sir George shifted his collar uneasily. "It was a tragedy, a real tragedy; but I knew him, and understand it. That makes the whole difference."

"But why? Either you stick to your ideas of heredity or you don't."

"Do you want me to stick to them?" Sir George was taken aback.

"Frankly, I don't; and I don't believe in them myself. Or if I do, I believe that we all have a few undesirable impulses and desires occasionally; but whether they break out and run riot in our lives depends on ourselves, and still more on whether they get a chance. You say Kitty's father was a good chap?"

"Delightful."

"And, I take it, an honourable man?"

"I am sure of it—except in that one instance."

"I don't see where your heredity comes in if it was only a case of the devil stalking up to him in the shape of a temptation."

"That's it. Came from the outside. In fact, my dear Harry, if you'll promise not to betray me, or——" his eyes lighted up with a momentary twinkle, but he felt that it would really not do to treat the matter as a joke—"I'll confess something to you. I feel that we don't know much about heredity—any of us. Various people have written about it, from philosophers to novelists. They put forth most ingenious theories,

and then up jumps some wag, or some fiend, as the case may be, in the shape of a fact, and gives them a slap in the face. That's my present point of view. As for Roycefield, I can't think of him without feeling that ruin came to him from carelessness, from reckless foolishness—as one may get run over by a taxi or killed in a railway accident without committing suicide. It is not a pretty history," he went on after a moment. "I wish it had been different." Sir George felt that he had to save his face, as Harry expressed it. "But if I know anything of human nature, Mrs. Roberts is a dear woman, as pure as snow, and Kitty takes after her; probably she has the fine qualities of her father as well."

"I'm certain of it—said so the other day," Harry answered, amused at his father's anxiety to veer round.

"And you shall go and tell her so to-morrow when she comes back."

"I don't believe she will give in—just because you knew her father. She was firm as a rock the other day—wouldn't even see me a second time when I wrote and asked her."

"I can't see why she should stand out when I consent." Sir George gave a quick little grunt.

"She won't come into our precious family, or any other, on sufferance, I can tell you; and your speech about my grave rankles. I couldn't move her the other day. I think you'd better go and have a turn at her yourself this time."

"I will, if you like. I presume you really want it to come all right?"

"Want it!" The voice said even more than the words. "I shall never marry anybody else. I shall go

on working, because I'm not a sentimental ass; but I don't believe I shall do half as much as I should have done with her." He walked across the room restlessly. "Look at the girls in London. They mean well—or they mean nothing—but look at them, and think of Kitty."

"My dear chap, if there's anything in the world I can do, it shall be done. I'll go and see her. I'll beg her pardon, if you like. I'll dig you up from your grave," he added with another twinkle. "I'll do anything."

"I shouldn't wonder if you get it hot," Harry said with a sorry laugh. "I did. I love her for it, but I adore her anyway."

"So do I," answered Sir George. "She has grit—I said it to myself all along. I shall like to see her sons."

"Well, I wouldn't count them yet if I were you. Just wait till you've heard what she says. She's a little darling."

"I can't forgive Mrs. Wrenford," Sir George said. His temper rose as he remembered her. That part of the day's revelation had been as astounding as any.

"I knew what she was all along."

"I didn't"—rather testily. "You young people always think you see so far."

"We do," said Harry; but his voice was affectionate, and gave no offence. "We are so keen. That's how I knew Kitty was all right the moment I saw her."

"Young people often make mistakes."

"Oh, yes, I allow that." He liked getting into an argument with his father. "But they often scent

things before the oldsters, and set off in the direction of the spoil for good or ill—not knowing what it is, but only that it's there."

"You make me think of Bateson's talk—which reminds me I had a letter from your aunt this morning. She said that Mrs. Roberts and Kitty were going to America with him and his sister next week."

"That's the deuce! They will have taken their passages; however, they can chuck them. If it comes right, I think we had better get married right off."

"You shall—you shall do anything you like."

"Dear old fellow, he's splendid. If he hadn't any principles there wouldn't be a fault to find with him," Harry thought. "However, I think he'll be content in future to take things as they are." A sudden thought struck him. "What are you going to do about Mrs. Wrenford? Is she to be let off scot free?" he asked.

Sir. George's anger began to rise at the mention of her name. "Certainly not," he said quickly.

"You might go and see her now," Harry wickedly suggested. "That would be rather sporting."

"I will, and at once," he said. "She's generally in at five. I should find her in half an hour's time."

"I wonder who'll get worsted in the encounter?"

"I shall speak very plainly," Sir George answered with a little snort, "and tell her it will be impossible to receive her again at Highwoods."

"She'll be your neighbour when she is in the cottage at Whitney. Don't you think you'd better write to her?"

"No," Sir George snapped with determination, "I shall go."

"Very well—good-bye. I'll leave you to your meditation and your visit."

Sir George walked up and down; looked at himself in the glass to see if his expression was up to the mark. Mrs. Wrenford had behaved in a dastardly manner, and must be told so. She deserved anything he might say to her, and he was determined to let her know his opinion of her conduct. "It's incomprehensible—incomprehensible," he said. "The fact is, she is an adventuress—the sort of woman who is designed for foreign export. I'm not sure that she cares for anything in the world but herself. She deserted that poor chap in his hour of need. Why should I suppose she has an atom of feeling for me or anybody else? Any man can be cajoled by a handsome woman if she knows how to use her weapons. We are all alike." Suddenly he remembered that day in Paris; it made him stamp with rage. There was the cross. He would have given twice its value to have had it safely returned to him, in the little white velvet case, to drop over a bridge into the deepest part of a river. To know that it would go about London on a slender chain to confront him at unexpected moments made him furious. Luckily Harry knew nothing. He never would. But Sir George felt that he had a secret that might be thought a guilty one if it were known, and with a start it occurred to him that it put him abreast with Mrs. Roberts. It was wholly different; but it showed that secrecy might be forced on one, and people easily misjudged. Harry might misunderstand if some day, out of pure deviltry, Mrs. Wrenford met him and told him of his father's gift to her in Paris.

His anger rose higher every moment. "I'll go to

her at once and be done with her." He hurried down to the street. He almost barked out the direction to the cabman, and drove off in hot haste. He gave the man sixpence too much and snapped at him.

"Is Mrs. Wrenford at home?" he asked, in a voice that made the porter half afraid of going up with him alone in the lift. "These women always live in flats," he thought, as he reached the fourth floor. He had just come from his own in Victoria Street, of course; but that was another story.

He was shown into a small drawing-room. He had admired it on the two or three previous visits he had paid her—in justice to him let it be stated they had been few and far between—but he snorted when he saw it now. It was all shaded light, soft colours, heaped-up cushions for seats, and pervaded with a faint Indian perfume that sent him back to the Punjab. "The room stamps her," he thought—quite unfairly.

Mrs. Wrenford was sitting on a low couch, in a tea-gown of grey-green silk with gold embroideries; a chiffon scarf hung from her shoulders, wide sleeves fell back and showed the whiteness of her arms—she made a striking central figure in her surroundings. At her throat, hanging by a slender chain, was the Maltese cross. Sir George saw it and cursed himself for a fool; it served to fan his anger into fury—he could hardly hide it. The diamonds seemed to flash more than usual, as if to worry him. "It's amazing how one's follies play one out," he thought.

By the couch was a high stool inlaid with mother-of-pearl; on it a blotting-case, bound in Indian silver work, and an inkstand to match—she had evidently been too indolent to go to the writing-table. Mr. Newsted Bryan was standing near her, taking leave.

"Sir George!——" She started to her feet in astonishment.

"How do you do?" he said, not offering to shake hands. "I've only come for a few minutes." He gave her visitor a look that was not pleasant.

"Please don't be unkind to me. I'm just going," the squeaky voice pleaded.

A curt "Good-day to you" was his reward.

Mr. Bryan bent over Mrs. Wrenford's hand. "Thank you so much for all your kindness, dear lady. I am quite unworthy to be in that august company, but you have given me courage." He retreated backwards to the door and disappeared.

"They have asked him for particulars about himself for 'Who's Who,'" she explained to Sir George.

"The Debrett of the middle class," he snapped.

"Oh, but the best people are in it too. We read the account of you only just now. How nice of you to come and see me."

His eyes had fastened on a note that had fallen from the blotting-book to the floor. The first side of it was uppermost; he recognised the heavy black writing though he had only seen it once before—his eyes were very sharp and his memory good. "*I'm sorry, but it's quite impossible,*" it began. She followed his gaze, then picked it up hastily. "Such a charming note from Mr. Wendover," she said, and put it away. "It is dear of you to come and see me; we'll have a good talk."

"I'm going to stay ten minutes, and I'm not likely to come again," he answered. "Why didn't you tell me that Mrs. Roberts was Roycefield's widow?"

In a moment she saw that the game was up, and promptly began to amuse herself.

"I thought you knew."

He saw the laughter in her eyes, and it maddened him. "It's a lie!" he said.

She made her mouth very round. "Oh, my dear friend, manners—manners!"

"I'm too angry to have any—besides, you deserve anything I may say to you. You knew that I had known and loved Roycefield. I remember that we talked of him in India and the interest you showed; but you took care not to say that you knew him—I understand the reason for that now."

"Of course you do," she said softly, feeling her way. "I made up to you chiefly in order to hear what you would say about him."

"You were engaged to him before he married his wife?"

"Oh, yes, and I threw him over," she said penitently, shaking her head; "and then he married that white-faced lady who looks as if she had been a Burne-Jones model."

"You're not fit to wipe her shoes."

"But I don't want to wipe them, dear Sir George;" she made big eyes at him and waited for his next remark.

"I believe it was you who caused all the mischief. It wasn't in his nature to do anything dishonourable."

She shrugged her shoulders and looked extremely handsome; it irritated him still more. "He wanted to make money and played the fool, as thousands of other men have done; he thought it would come right if he borrowed money—some one else's money—without asking leave. But he was very charming, wasn't he? I can't think how that woman could stay in Wales with

her father and baby—in a cottage that probably had smoky chimneys—while he was in London.”

“While you ruined him, you mean, and then went off with him.”

“No,” she said quickly.

“You went after him?”

Her mood changed and became graver. “Yes, I did. It was his turn then. I had grown fond of him, and hated the man I was married to—he was a brute. I couldn’t bear to lose Jack again. I gave up everything and went after him by the next boat—I knew he’d have to wait twenty-four hours at Cherbourg.”

“And you deserted him in his worst hour. The papers said the woman had disappeared who had been with him.”

She got up and stood facing him; there was real passion in her voice and every syllable was clear: “What good should I have done by sticking to him then, by coming back with him, to go into court and come out of it with my character smirched and my portrait in the evening papers? I did the wisest thing and slipped away; it was no one’s business to seek me, and luckily my name did not appear.”

“Probably you went about with your precious followers while he was being tried.”

She turned upon him furiously at last. “If you care to know, I was in Half Moon Street, in lodgings—crouching, miserable, broken. I heard them cry the verdict in the streets, and prayed that he might die. I knew it would be better than prison for him.”

“That prayer was answered.”

“Yes; and they sent for her when he was dying. It

was her hour, not mine—I heard it and could have killed her.”

“Is that why you were so cruel to her, even after all these years?”

“I don’t know; I only know that I hated her—I hated her. I could never get his love back again after he had seen her. I had an influence over him; I could rouse him, but he never really cared for me again. It served me right.” She looked splendid while she said it, like a hunted creature facing a cruel pursuer. Sir George saw it and acknowledged it to himself.

“You had never seen Mrs. Roberts before—did you know she had taken that name?”

“No, but I was put on the track by Kitty’s likeness to her father.”

“I wonder you didn’t—at least—love Kitty for his sake.”

“His child and another woman’s! Why should I love that? I hated her; I couldn’t forgive her for being his—but not mine. Besides, I didn’t want her at Highwoods.” She turned and moved a little bronze animal on the mantelpiece. A mood of reckless humour came over her. “You see, I’d some idea of marrying you,” she said airily.

He nearly bounded forward. “Of marrying me?”

“Yes, by-and-by, when I was older and thought I could stand your tiresomeness; so I didn’t want Kitty there.”

“I shouldn’t have dreamt of marrying you.” He was astounded.

“Yes, you would.” Her voice grew sweet; it was tinged with sadness, though there was amusement in it again. “I should have got you back. During that

week in Paris that you are ashamed of now you were rather fond of me, though you won't own it—wouldn't then—and took me to dine at horribly proper places—do you remember? I was so bored; but I had learnt the value of respectability by that time—one does after thirty. Oh, yes, don't make any mistake," she went on as he stood staring at her; "I could have married you in the end if I'd liked—when I liked, in fact—if I'd thought it worth while."

"I shall be an old man soon——" he began indignantly.

"I'm a middle-aged woman, but what does that matter? Men and women go on much longer than they imagine they will when they are young; they are always alive, unless they wear themselves out or let themselves rust out—only they don't all know it, and don't take the trouble to keep themselves up to the mark, but just grow dull and stupid. I never shall—never."

He gave her a frown, but he was too bewildered to speak.

"Yes, and you would have succumbed when I chose," she laughed and looked at him triumphantly—almost critically. "How funny you would have been."

"A woman who must have had a score of lovers——"

"More, many more—don't underrate me—I have had them since I was fifteen. But I'll tell you this—I haven't cared for one of them since Jack died. Perhaps I should if he had loved me again, but because he didn't I wanted to put my heel on the neck of every man who grovelled before me." She held her throat; there was a curious little sound in it. "I didn't care for one of them. I only amused myself and laughed

at them behind their backs—just as I laugh at you now.”

“I’m much obliged”; he was recovering from his petrification.

“You needn’t be,” she returned. “I’ve done with you, and it doesn’t matter—that’s why I give myself the treat of this plain speaking.” She threw her hands up above her head, her arms—white and very shapely—showed as her sleeves fell back. She gave a cry of joy. “Thank Heaven, I’ve escaped the boredom of Highwoods, which I might have taken one day when I was down on my luck—and regretted ever afterwards.” He was too dumfounded to speak. She had a sudden idea, and laughed at it before she added, “You may buy the cottage at Whitney if you like; I will sell it to you cheap, with the builder’s contract included—you can think of heredity when you go over it.”

He went a step forward, inarticulate with rage, then turned his back on her.

“You want to go?” she asked mockingly. “I’m not surprised; you’ll never—never forget me.”

He strode to the door.

“Good-bye, dear George.”

He slammed it behind him.

She threw herself down on the sofa convulsed with laughter. “Oh, it was good to speak out for once,” she cried, “with all one’s heart and soul. How I hate him, and all the fools—every one in the whole world. I should like to grind them to dust, the fiddling fools of men, stuffed full of vanity, and all white-faced women that breathe. There was never any one worth living for but Jack.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

SIR GEORGE felt limp and chastened after his interview with Mrs. Wrenford. The common strain in her he had always seen, though only unwillingly; the vulgarity that had blazed forth between the gusts of passion had taken him by surprise. But he understood them. She had come of an undesirable set, to which that fellow Norton had belonged; it had brought about Roycefield's ruin. A minor detail and blow to his vanity was that he had always given her credit for a genuine regard for himself. He had imagined, with a little inward smile, that she had been attracted to him even in India years ago. He had taken care not to give her encouragement; but it was why he had done his best for her on a station that had looked at her doubtfully, why he had more or less kept on terms with her in London and invited her to Highwoods. Now, every theory concerning her was upset and all his vanity snuffed out. At first he had only been a sort of stepping-stone on the path of her thoughts to another man; of late years, little more than a possible speculation concerning her future. He was thunderstruck at having been taken in by her.

He sat pretending to read the *Times*; in reality telling himself that he was a fool; but the masculine nature is apt to shift the blame from itself to the circumstances that have brought about its discomfiture, and he soon recovered. It was as well, seeing what he had to do.

"You think you would rather go and see them yourself?" Harry asked. This was the next day. He had not much confidence in his father's success. However, there was always the chance of taking a passage in the same ship if they were going a voyage. Kitty would find it difficult to escape him on board. He knew she loved him; not to believe it would be an insult to her—that was the fact on which he relied, though he feared there would be a tussle to get her back again; perhaps it was as well that his father should begin it.

"Yes, I would," Sir George answered. "I feel that I owe it to Mrs. Roberts—for we'll still call her so. The catastrophe began with me; let me end it. I'll let you know the result of my interview, by messenger or telegram."

"I'll pray for you," Harry said, with his father's own twinkle in his eyes. He felt as Mrs. Roberts had done concerning herself, though with some amusement in spite of his anxiety as to results, that his parent was about to be thrown to the lions, but nice feminine lions who would growl but perhaps not have the heart to bite. He himself was just marking time now, of course; it was no good going near Kitty again till she was calmer, but he loved her more than ever, and was doggedly determined to get her.

Bogey had been doubtful about the time of Miss Bateson's return. She would probably bring Mrs. Roberts with her, Sir George thought. After some consideration he decided to call at two o'clock; an awkward hour, but one at which he was pretty sure to find them. The luncheon hour was half-past one—it would be over and the afternoon programme not yet entered upon.

Bogey looked at him doubtfully. "Mrs. Roberts not here," he said, before a question could be asked.

"And Miss Bateson?"

"She there—in library." The morning-room had more or less been given up to Mrs. Roberts during her visit, and Miss Bateson had written notes and transacted her business in the library, where a faint not unpleasant odour still betrayed the newness of the books. She greeted him joyfully.

"Why, Sir George, I knew you'd come. I thought you wouldn't be so mad as to stay away long." She showed the two rows of little white teeth and her face glowed with satisfaction.

"I'm delighted to see you, my dear lady," he held her hand for a moment. "It's most kind of you to receive me. I deserve nothing——"

"Well, but doesn't that make it better?"

"Do you think it does?"

"Why, yes; if one deserves a thing it's like a payment; if one doesn't, one's more grateful, don't you think?"

"I'm very grateful to you."

"Don't know what for." He heard the cadence again with real pleasure. "But I'm longing to know why you've come—if it was to see me or Mrs. Roberts or Kitty?"

"To see you all," he answered gallantly "though on this—this occasion I own that I am even more extremely anxious to see them." Sir George was himself again and realised it. With a little flick and almost a shudder he had chased Mrs. Wrenford off his mental arena.

"Well, Mrs. Roberts and Kitty are out shopping

they came back early on purpose. They're getting ready, you may be sure."

"Getting ready?"

"Why, yes; we sail on Saturday week for New York. We shan't stay there; it's only the starting-place and we're going far." She delighted in telling him this, though her belief in that journey was suddenly shaken. "We are all four going—Mrs. Roberts and Kitty and Darragh and I—Darragh is so happy you wouldn't know him—he says they're just lovely."

"I quite agree with him."

"I am glad to hear you say that."

The smile was on her little dry lips, her clear truthful eyes looked straight into his. He saw the freckles on her nose plainly, and the dulness of her hair; he lowered his glance to the trimness of her waist, the smallness of her hands; to the tips of the walking shoes that protruded from her short skirt—he was sensible of their sturdy quality. This woman was genuine from top to toe, he thought, and felt respect and liking for her—as he had done from the hour he met her.

She waited a moment for him to speak before she added, "Why you broke off that engagement, Sir George, I can't think?"

"There were family reasons," he said, jibbing a little—as he had expressed it—at the account to which he was about to be called.

"Why, yes, I know—that is, I know something. I said I wouldn't ask questions, and I don't want you to answer any I don't ask."

"That would be difficult." He laughed at the confusion of her words, and looked at her again, "Per-

haps you know what it is about?" he said tentatively.

"It's about the father, I expect—haven't been told; but if it is, why I can't see that it matters. In fact, it's quite usual."

"Quite usual?"

"Quite usual," she repeated. "Hasn't everybody a father who was a bankrupt, or an uncle in a lunatic asylum, or an aunt who was divorced, or a grandfather who was an old rip—doesn't matter a bit. It puts a little variety into the family. Think of the people who go along dull roads that haven't any turnings; they never do anything that counts. My goodness, look at what America's doing now, and the Western States, where Darragh was, and Canada! Why, people there have come from the earth, or from the far corners, where nobody knows what they did; some of them from the scum, from the dregs, from anything. As for New South Wales, why lots of their great-grandfathers were convicts, and aren't your aristocrats over here glad to marry them?"

"You are quite eloquent."

"No; I am just passing on what Darragh says."

"I believe in a long, clean descent."

"I daresay,"—the cadence came in again as it always did if she felt anything keenly—"pity so many of them over here get tired and ruin it at this end, don't you think?" But he made no answer.

She looked up at him. "Tell you what Sir George, we can't go past human nature, or look behind it. We've got to take it in hand as it is, and love it and put the best we know round it, and wait—just wait. But I'd like you to hear Darragh, he's eloquent—

though I don't think you'll get him to talk of anything just now but Kitty and Mrs. Roberts. He does love them. You see, Mrs. Roberts has gone on even past environment to the next thing—she's given it to Kitty."

"What's that?" he asked.

"Darragh knows," Miss Bateson answered, "it is strange you can't see. Why, Sir George, you're just blind."

He thought a moment, and gave it up. "I don't see." But he had no time now for Darragh's mystification. "I'm going to confide in you," he went on, "I want to get Kitty back again for my son."

She considered a moment. "Darragh wants her, but I don't think he'll ever get her. She's breaking her heart for Harry, but she wouldn't like any one to know it. She'd rather break it than give in; that's why I'll do what I can."

"For God's sake, do," he said quickly. "He adores her."

"Well, he's a nice boy." She waited a moment, and then added suddenly, "I put this house into an agent's hands for sale. Don't expect he'll sell it before Saturday week, but that won't matter."

"You must never sell it; you must come back and live here. What time will Mrs. Roberts and Kitty return?" He could hardly keep down the emotion in his voice.

"I don't know; daresay she'll be in by four." She stopped a moment, then looked up with laughter in her clear eyes; she couldn't help it. "Don't know if I ought to help you, after all."

"Why not?"

"Well, suppose you are right in what you think, Harry might take after you, and see what a lot of trouble you've made."

"I deserve that," he said, grateful for the little joke.

"You know it's just a fad of yours." Miss Bateson could say what she pleased. I have fads, too, sometimes. Once I used to collect insurance coupons from cheap papers on the chance of an accident, or getting killed; but I never did. So I gave that up. Another time I had a fad—quite different—about Shelley. I thought him sublime, and bought all his works, but I never found time to read them. I lost them—I don't know where—think it was in a railway station. I never said it before, but the relief it was to lose those books you can't think. Well, now, what are we going to do?" for she felt they ought to get to details. "Kitty's very angry; I don't think she'll see you, and Mrs. Roberts won't."

"My dear lady, I'm in your hands."

"Tell you what—Mrs. Roberts will be in by four. I'll take care she's in the drawing-room. You walk in, say at half-past four, and you'll find her there alone. You must get all you've got to say done by five o'clock, and then walk down to the morning-room—just walk straight in, Kitty shall be there. They'll neither of them know what's going to happen and you won't," she added. "Isn't that diplomatic? I've thought it out all in a minute."

"I'm more grateful to you than I can say, though if I succeed I'm afraid your brother won't be."

"Darragh? Darragh just loves Kitty. Do you think he doesn't want the best in the world for her;

and isn't the best for all us women the man that we love? Think it is."

"I wish I were the man you loved best," he said, and made his most courtly bow as he departed.

He telegraphed the arrangement and the time to Harry. "Poor chap, he'll have a bad hour waiting for the verdict," he thought. "But I hope—well, I'm afraid to hope."

It wasn't so difficult as he had feared with Mrs. Roberts. She sat near the farther window in the drawing-room—he noticed that she always sat near windows. Perhaps it was that she liked to see the sky and the outward surroundings. The sun-blinds were stretched over the balcony just as at Cannero; there were masses of flowers everywhere, as there always had been in that house; and the room had an air of beauty and severity fitting to the fair woman who sat unconsciously awaiting him. If she received him coldly, the smile that had enchanted him more than he had imagined came and went during the interview, and the blue eyes looked up at him with a knowledge and understanding that forgave everything.

"If you'd only told me his name," he said.

"I never dreamt that you had known him, or that the name could matter—would make any difference."

"Of course not; but it does make a world of difference. If I had known—why, every one liked poor Jack Roycefield, and knew that what he did was bad luck rather than a crime; a temporary fit of insanity." He did the thing generously while he was about it.

"Mr. Godstone loved him," she pleaded: it proved everything in her eyes.

"He was a most charming fellow; everybody did. That made it so much talked about, such a tragedy. It was like a fall from a house-top. I think," he said it gently, as if in excuse for himself, "that Kitty ought to have known before."

She folded her hands over each other in the manner peculiar to her. "When he was dying," she said in a low voice, "he told me never to let his child know. I promised him she never should—I promised. And after that how could I tell her? Perhaps I was wrong, you won't understand, but I couldn't." She stopped for a minute. "There are some inner sanctuaries that no second person can enter—'the human soul is a very lonely thing,'—Kipling said that."

"It's one of the best things he ever did say."

But she hardly seemed to hear him, and went on as if she were speaking to some unseen presence near her. "And in that inner sanctuary and by that most merciful judge—my conscience, I stand acquitted."

"I believe it," he answered. "I believe it with all my heart. But if he had known, he would never have extracted that promise from you; he would have left everything to your discretion. We should think of ourselves as soldiers in the world, and of truth as our sword, and never let it go. It's the weapon that Heaven gives us." He wondered how he thought of this, and quite admired it.

"But a sword kills—kills."

"It cuts away all evil growths and gives the victory to that which is best." He felt that he was coming out of it rather well. She took no notice of his metaphors, only looked at him with the smile he could have loved—perhaps did.

"And you'll think kindly of us when we're gone?"

"Gone? You are not going?" He rose quickly and went towards her.

"We must. The children couldn't marry each other after all this."

"They must, they shall—I've set my heart upon it."

"There's the heredity business."

"Heredity be——" he checked himself just in time—"forgive me if I let off steam. I feel certain that at the time of Kitty's birth there had not been a dishonourable moment in Jack Roycefield's life—and as for the one that came later—well, but for the grace of God any of us may yield to a sudden temptation. It's the things in our nature, the habits we may transmit, that matter most—there's more danger to posterity in the daily meanness, the petty falsehoods, the narrow outlook of many people who go to church, than in a solitary offence for which sometimes a man makes life-long expiation. I'm not a fool or a fanatic. Tell me you want the children to marry—that you can tolerate the boy." His voice was eager—pleading, it was impossible to withstand it.

"I long for them to marry," she said, "I love Harry. I would give everything in the world to see them together." Her face lighted up, as she stood facing him—with a background of sun-blind and flowers—she looked young and beautiful, transfigured with happiness, he felt as if he could kiss the hem of her skirt. "And oh, if you could know what it is to think that all the secrecy is at an end and yet that he's not misjudged—and above all, that these dear things are going to be happy!"

"We must keep Godstone in England till it's over."

He had of course told her of their meeting at the beginning of their interview. He was silent for a moment, then a thought occurred to him. "Did Wendover know?" he asked.

"Yes. He has known—since years ago. He wanted me to tell you. That was why he wouldn't stay at Highwoods. He said he couldn't eat the salt of a man while he knew a secret concerning him that ought to be told."

"He's a fine fellow," Sir George said with a little sigh, "a fine fellow; I've a great respect for him."

The clock chimed five.

"I'm going down to Kitty; she's in the morning-room—our good little hostess has managed it. If she gives in we'll telegraph to the boy."

He was repaid with a look that was radiant.

But Kitty was more difficult than her mother. She stood up straight and proud and was very grave; her eyes had knowledge in them. "I can't see that it makes any difference your having known my father," she said. "It may make one to you but it doesn't to me. You want, out of kindness, to do something in the face of your convictions—because you liked him and perhaps because you are sorry for us. I can't agree to it, even for Harry's sake. I told him so the other day."

"I thought you loved him?"

"I do—I love him dearly," she said quickly, "but it wouldn't be happiness to marry him at that price."

"At what price, my dear Kitty?"

"At the price of knowing that you had condoned my father's offence. Oh, I've thought it all out—

every night since, every hour, I think—out—and out—and out,” she said vehemently, putting her hands over her face. “For Harry said all he knew, and I would have given in to him if I could. You would never forget what my father did; you would never forget that my mother concealed it, though she was perfectly right to keep it from me since she had promised. You would be suspicious of me, you said—Harry and I were outside the window and heard—that penalties had to be paid. I should pay it all my life if I married Harry. I should know that you were watching me to see that some wrong instinct was kept in check—I couldn’t bear it—couldn’t bear it!”

“Kitty, my dear child, you’ve been thinking too much.”

“Thinking too much?” she said with a little thrill in her voice. “I’ve been thinking every minute since—I’ve grown years older—I have spent all the joy in my heart on it.”

“And you can’t forgive me?” he pleaded when he had used all the arguments that had succeeded with her mother.

“Forgive you? There’s nothing to forgive. You did what you thought was right, but I couldn’t marry him now—I won’t.”

“Harry is devoted to you. You can’t care for him.”

“I do. I do,” she said passionately. “Oh, you don’t know how much I love him, but I won’t marry him—I won’t and you can’t want me after all you said I did——” She could not go on.

He saw her tremble and felt that the breaking-down point was reached for her, but which way it would go was doubtful. “I do want you, dear,” he

said. "I long for you to marry him—and your mother does—are you going to make us all miserable?"

She looked up; her cheeks were burning. "You said you would rather see him in his grave than married to me. I would rather be in mine than married to him——" whereupon he was dumfounded.

Then at the psychological moment the door opened and a little note marked "Urgent" was brought in to her.

"He said read immediately," Bogey interposed and disappeared.

She looked at it bewildered: she knew the handwriting well enough, and almost without knowing it her fingers tore open the envelope. "Do you mind if I read it?" she asked.

"Do," he said, wondering what it might be, but with an idea that it was going to help him.

Harry knew from the telegram the precise moment at which the interview would be taking place and had artfully put in his plea:

"Darling" (the note ran) "do forgive him—he's broken-hearted and would rather see me in my grave than *not* married to you. Your adoring,

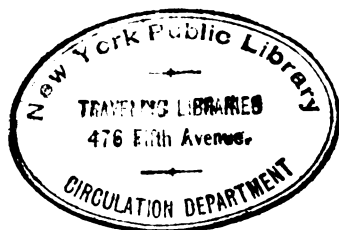
"HARRY."

"Oh," she laughed; but the tears came to her eyes. "What am I to do?—it's so absurd—and he is such a dear, I couldn't bear to let him go." The tears brimmed over; they looked at each other for a moment. "Perhaps you won't forgive me now—I've been very horrid," she said humbly. "I've scolded you so."

"My dear"—his voice trembled—"I'm glad you

have—you shall scold me as much as you like if you'll let Harry give you a right to do so." He pulled her gently towards him till her head rested on his shoulder.

"I will—oh, I will," she said, and sobbed—for sheer happiness.



THE END

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